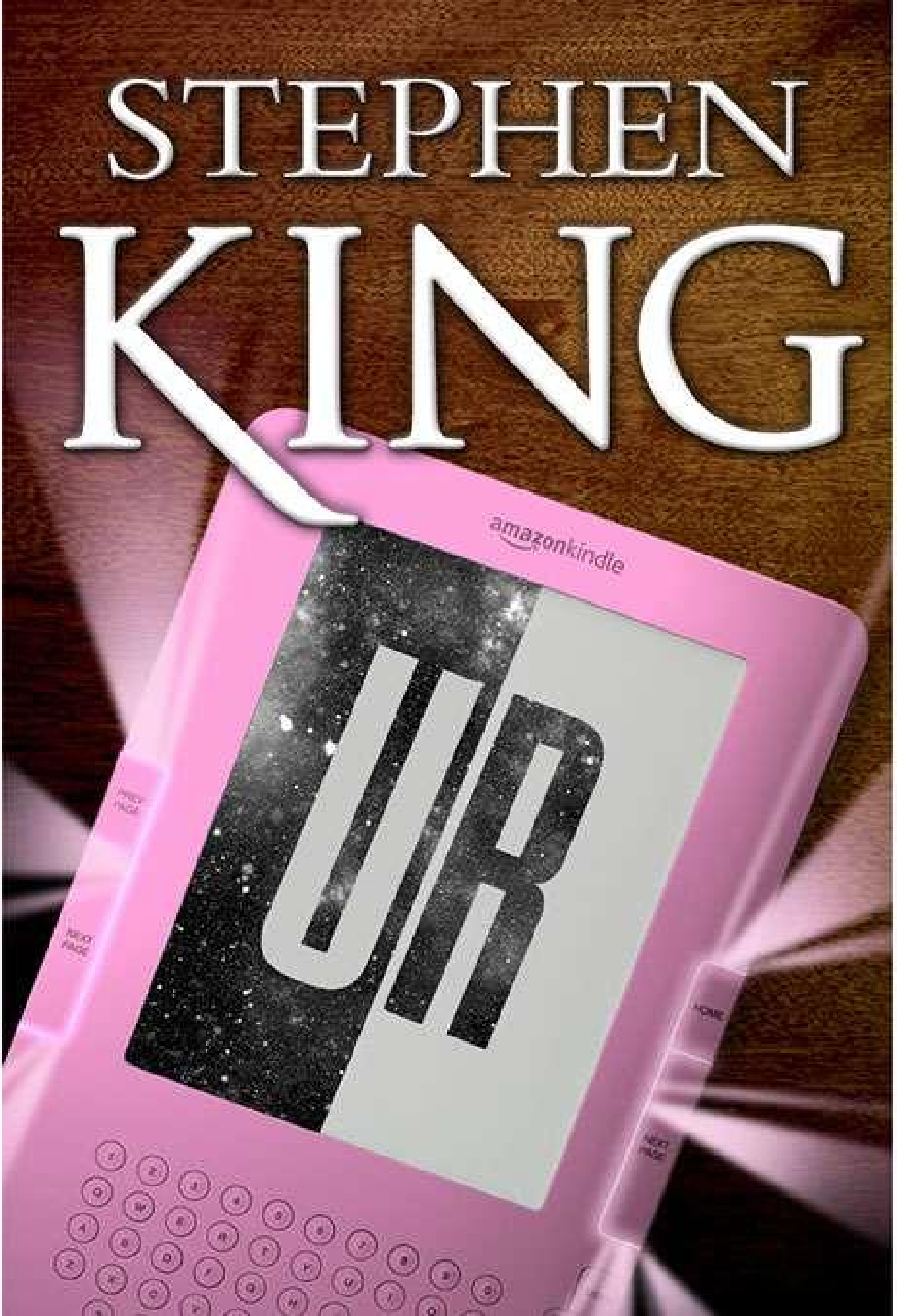
STEPHEN
KING
amazonkindle
UR

UR

by

Stephen King

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I—Experimenting with New Technology

When Wesley Smith's colleagues asked him—some with an eyebrow hoicked satirically—what he was doing with that gadget (they all called it a gadget), he told them he was experimenting with new technology, but that was not true.

He bought the gadget, which was called a Kindle, out of spite.

I wonder if the market analysts at Amazon even have that one on their product-survey radar, he thought. He guessed not. This gave him some satisfaction, but not as much as he hoped to derive from Ellen Silverman's surprise when she saw him with his new purchase. That hadn't happened yet, but it would. It was a small campus, after all, and he'd only been in possession of his new toy (he called it his new toy, at least to begin with) for a week.

Wesley was an instructor in the English Department at MooreCollege, in Moore, Kentucky. Like all instructors of English, he thought he had a novel in him somewhere and would write it someday. MooreCollege was the sort of institution that people call "a good school." Wesley's friend in the English Department (his only friend in the English Department) once explained what that meant. His friend's name was Don Allman, and when he introduced himself, he liked to say, "One of the Allman Brothers. I play a mean tuba." (He did not actually play anything.)

"A good school," he said, "is one nobody has ever heard of outside a thirty-mile radius. People call it a good school because nobody knows it's a *bad* school, and most people are optimists, although they may claim they are not. People who call themselves realists are often the biggest optimists of all."

"Does that make you a realist?" Wesley once asked him.

"I think the world is mostly populated by shitheads," Don Allman responded. "*You* figure it out."

Moore wasn't a good school, but neither was it a bad school. On the great scale of academic excellence, its place resided just a little south of

mediocre. Most of its three thousand students paid their bills and many of them got jobs after graduating, although few went on to obtain (or even try for) graduate degrees. There was a fair amount of drinking, and of course there were parties, but on the great scale of party-schools, Moore's place resided a little to the north of mediocre. It had produced politicians, but all of the small-water variety, even when it came to graft and chicanery. In 1978, one Moore graduate was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, but he dropped dead of a heart attack after serving only four months. His replacement was a graduate of Baylor.

The school's only marks of exceptionality had to do with its Division Three football team and its Division Three women's basketball team. The football team (the Moore Meerkats) was one of the worst in America, having won only seven games in the last ten years. There was constant talk of disbanding it. The current coach was a drug addict who liked to tell people that he had seen *The Wrestler* twelve times and never failed to cry when Mickey Rourke told his estranged daughter that he was just a broken-down piece of meat.

The women's basketball team, however, was exceptional in a *good* way, especially considering that most of the players were no more than five-feet-seven and were preparing for jobs as marketing managers, wholesale buyers, or (if they were lucky) personal assistants to Men of Power. The Lady Meerkats had won eight conference titles in the last ten years. The coach was Wesley's ex-girlfriend, *ex* as of one month previous. Ellen Silverman was the source of the spite that had moved Wesley to buy a Kindle from Amazon, Inc., the company that sold them. Well…Ellen and the Henderson kid in Wesley's Introduction to Modern American Fiction class.

•

Don Allman also claimed the Moore faculty was mediocre. Not terrible, like the football team—that, at least, would have been interesting—but definitely mediocre.

“What about us?” Wesley asked. They were in the office they shared. If a student came in for a conference, the instructor who had not been sought would leave. For most of the fall and spring semesters this was not an issue, as students never came in for conferences until just before finals. Even then, only the veteran grade-grubbers, the ones who’d been doing it since elementary school, turned up. Don Allman said he sometimes fantasized about a juicy coed wearing a tee-shirt that said I WILL SCREW YOU FOR AN A, but this never happened.

“What about us? What about *us*? *Look* at us, bro.”

“I’m going to write a novel,” Wesley replied, although even saying it depressed him. Almost everything depressed him since Ellen had walked out. When he wasn’t depressed, he felt spiteful.

“Yes! And President Obama is going to tab me as the new Poet Laureate!” Don Allman exclaimed. Then he pointed at something on Wesley’s cluttered desk. The Kindle was currently sitting on *American Dreams*, the textbook Wesley used in his Intro to American Lit class. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Fine,” Wesley said.

“Will it ever replace the book?”

“Never,” Wesley said. But he had already begun to wonder.

“I thought they only came in white,” Don Allman said.

Wesley looked at Don as haughtily as he himself had been looked at in the department meeting where his Kindle had made its public debut. “Nothing only comes in white,” he said. “This is America.”

Don Allman considered this, then said: “I heard you and Ellen broke up.”

Wesley sighed.

•

Ellen had been his *other* friend, and one with benefits, until four weeks ago. She wasn’t in the English Department, of course, but the thought of going to bed with anyone in the English Department, even

Suzanne Montanari, who was vaguely presentable, made him shudder. Ellen was five-two (eyes of blue!), slim, with a mop of short, curly black hair that made her look distinctly elfin. She had a dynamite figure and kissed like a dervish. (Wesley had never kissed a dervish, but he could imagine.) Nor did her energy flag when they were in bed.

Once, winded, he lay back and said, “I’ll never equal you as a lover.”

“If you keep talking snooty like that, you won’t be my lover for long. You’re okay, Wes.”

But he guessed he wasn’t. He guessed he was just sort of…mediocre.

It wasn’t his less-than-athletic sexual ability that ended their relationship, however. It wasn’t the fact that Ellen was a vegan with tofu hotdogs in her fridge. It wasn’t the fact that she would sometimes lie in bed after lovemaking, talking about pick-and-rolls, give-and-gos, and the inability of Shawna Deeson to learn something Ellen called “the old garden gate.” In fact, these monologues sometimes put Wesley into his deepest, sweetest, and most refreshing sleeps. He thought it was the monotony of her voice, so different from the shrieks (often profane) of encouragement she let out while they were making love, shrieks that were similar to the ones she uttered during games, running up and down the sidelines like a hare (or a squirrel going up a tree), exhorting her girls to “Pass the ball!” and “Go to the hole!” and “Drive the paint!” Sometimes in bed she was reduced to yelling “Harder, harder, harder!” As, in the closing minutes of a game, she was often able to exhort no more than “Bucket-bucket-*bucket*!”

They were in some ways perfectly matched, at least for the short term; she was fiery iron, straight from the forge, and he—in his apartment filled with books—was the water in which she cooled herself.

The books were the problem. That, and the fact that he had called her an illiterate bitch. He had never called a woman such a thing in his life before, but she had surprised an anger out of him that he had never suspected. He might be a mediocre instructor, as Don Allman had suggested, and the novel he had in him might remain in him (like a wisdom tooth that never comes up, at least avoiding the possibility of rot, infection,

and an expensive—not to mention painful—dental process), but he loved books. Books were his Achilles heel.

She had come in fuming, which was not new, but also fundamentally upset—a state he failed to recognize because he had never seen her in it before. Also, he was re-reading James Dickey's *Deliverance*, reveling again in how well Dickey had harnessed his poetic sensibility, at least that once, to narrative, and he had just gotten to the closing passages, where the unfortunate canoeists are trying to cover up both what they have done and what has been done to them. He had no idea that Ellen had just been forced to boot Shawna Deeson off the team, or that the two of them had had a screaming fight in the gym in front of the whole team—plus the boys' basketball team, which was waiting their turn to practice their mediocre moves—or that Shawna Deeson had then gone outside and heaved a large rock at the windshield of Ellen's Volvo, an act for which she would surely be suspended. He had no idea that Ellen was now blaming herself, *bitterly* blaming herself, because "she was supposed to be the adult."

He heard that part—"I'm supposed to be the adult"—and said *Uh-huh* for the fifth or sixth time, which was one time too many for Ellen Silverman, whose fiery temper hadn't exhausted itself for the day after all. She plucked *Deliverance* from Wesley's hands, threw it across the room, and said the words that would haunt him for the next lonely month:

"Why can't you just read off the computer, like the rest of us?"

"She really said that?" Don Allman asked, a remark that woke Wesley from a trancelike state. He realized he had just told the whole story to his office-mate. He hadn't meant to, but he had. And there was no going back now.

"She did. And I said, 'That was a first edition I got from my father, you illiterate bitch.'"

Don Allman was speechless. He could only stare.

"She walked out," Wesley said miserably. "I haven't seen or spoken to her since."

"Haven't even called to say you're sorry?"

Wesley had tried to do this, and had gotten only her answering machine. He had thought of going over to the house she rented from the college, but thought she might put a fork in his face…or some other part of his anatomy. Also, he didn't consider what had happened to be entirely his fault. She hadn't even given him a *chance. Plus…she was* illiterate, or close to it. Had told him once in bed that the only book she'd read for pleasure since coming to Moore was *Reach for the Summit: The Definite Dozen System for Succeeding at Whatever You Do*, by Tennessee Vols coach Pat Summit. She watched TV (mostly sports), and when she wanted to dig deeper into some news story, she went to The Drudge Report. She certainly wasn't computer illiterate. She praised the MooreCollege wireless network (which was superlative rather than mediocre), and never went anywhere without her laptop slung over her shoulder. On the front was a picture of Tamika Catchings with blood running down her face from a split eyebrow and the legend I PLAY LIKE A GIRL.

Don Allman sat in silence for a few moments, tapping his fingers on his narrow chest. Outside their window, November leaves rattled across Moore Quadrangle. Then he said: "Did Ellen walking out have anything to do with that?" He nodded to Wesley's new electronic sidekick. "It did, didn't it? You decided to read off the computer, just like the rest of us. To… what? Woo her back?"

"No," Wesley said, because he didn't want to tell the truth: in a way he still didn't completely understand, he had done it to get back at her. Or make fun of her. Or something. "Not at all. I'm merely experimenting with new technology."

"Right," said Don Allman. "And I'm the new Poet Laureate."

•

His car was in Parking Lot A, but Wesley elected to walk the two miles back to his apartment, a thing he often did when he wanted to think. He trudged down

Moore Avenue

, first past the fraternity houses, then past apartment houses blasting rock and rap from every window, then past the bars and take-out restaurants that serve as a life-support system for every small college in America. There was also a bookstore specializing in used texts and last year's bestsellers offered at fifty per cent off. It looked dusty and dispirited and was often empty. Because people were home reading off the computer, Wesley assumed.

Brown leaves blew around his feet. His briefcase banged against one knee. Inside were his texts, the current book he was reading for pleasure (*2666*, by the late Roberto Bolano), and a bound notebook with beautiful marbleized boards. This had been a gift from Ellen on the occasion of his birthday.

"For your book ideas," she had said.

In July, that was, when things between them had still been swell and they'd had the campus pretty much to themselves. The blank book had over two hundred pages, but only the first one had been marked by his large, flat scrawl.

At the top of the page (printed) was: THE NOVEL!

Below that was: *A young boy discovers that his father and mother are both having affairs*

And

A young boy, blind since birth, is kidnapped by his lunatic grandfather who

And

A teenager falls in love with his best friend's mother and

Below this one was the final idea, written shortly after Ellen had thrown *Deliverance* across the room and stalked out of his life.

A shy but dedicated small college instructor and his athletic but largely illiterate girlfriend have a falling-out after

It was probably the best idea—write what you know, all the experts agreed on that—but he simply couldn't go there. Talking to Don had been

hard enough. And even then, complete honesty had escaped him. Like saying how much he wanted her back, for instance.

As he approached the three-room flat he called home—what Don Allman sometimes called his “bachelor pad”—Wesley’s thoughts turned to the Henderson kid. Was his name Richard or Robert? Wesley had a block about that, not the same as the block he had about fleshing out any of the fragmentary mission-statements for his novel, but probably related. He had an idea all such blocks were probably fear-centered and basically hysterical in nature, as if the brain detected (or thought it had detected) some nasty interior beast and had locked it in a cell with a steel door. You could hear it thumping and jumping in there like a rabid raccoon that would bite if approached, but you couldn’t see it.

The Henderson kid was on the football team—a noseback or point guard or some such thing—and while he was as horrible on the gridiron as any of them, he was a nice kid and a fairly good student. Wesley liked him. But still, he had been ready to tear the boy’s head off when he spotted him in class with what Wesley assumed was a PDA or a newfangled cell phone. This was shortly after Ellen had walked out. In those early days of the breakup, Wesley often found himself up at three in the morning, pulling some literary comfort-food down from the shelf: usually his old friends Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, their adventures recounted by Patrick O’Brian. And not even that had kept him from remembering the ringing slam of the door as Ellen left his life, probably for good.

So he was in a foul mood and more than ready for backtalk as he approached Henderson and said, “Put it away. This is a literature class, not an Internet chat-room.”

The Henderson kid had looked up and given him a sweet smile. It hadn’t lifted Wesley’s foul mood in the slightest, but it did dissolve his anger on contact. Mostly because he wasn’t an angry man by nature. He supposed he was *depressive* by nature, maybe even dysthymic. Hadn’t he always suspected that Ellen Silverman was too good for him? Hadn’t he known, in his heart of hearts, that the doorslam had been waiting for him

from the very beginning, when he'd spent the evening talking to her at a boring faculty party? Ellen played like a girl; he played like a loser. He couldn't even stay mad at a student who was goofing with his pocket computer (or Nintendo, or whatever it was) in class.

"It's the assignment, Mr. Smith," the Henderson kid had said (on his forehead was a large purple bruise from his latest outing in the Meerkat blue). "It's 'Paul's Case.' Look."

The kid turned the gadget so Wesley could see it. It was a flat white panel, rectangular, less than half an inch thick. At the top was **amazon**kindle and the smile-logo Wesley knew well; he was not entirely computer illiterate himself, and had ordered books from Amazon plenty of times (although he usually tried the bookstore in town first, partly out of pity; even the cat who spent most of its life dozing in the window looked malnourished).

The interesting thing on the kid's gadget wasn't the logo on top or the teeny-tiny keyboard (a computer keyboard, surely!) on the bottom. In the middle of the gadget was a screen, and on the screen was not a screen-saver or a video game where young men and women with buffed-out bodies were killing zombies in the ruins of New York, but a page of Willa Cather's story about the poor boy with the destructive illusions.

Wesley had reached for it, then drew back his hand. "May I?"

"Go ahead," the Henderson kid—Richard or Robert—told him. "It's pretty neat. You can download books from thin air, and you can make the type as big as you want. Also, the books are cheaper because there's no paper or binding."

That sent a minor chill through Wesley. He became aware that most of his Intro to American Lit class was watching him. As a thirty-five-year-old, Wesley supposed it was hard for them to decide if he was Old School (like the ancient Dr. Wence, who looked remarkably like a crocodile in a three-piece suit) or NewSchool (like Suzanne Montanari, who liked to play Avril Lavigne's "Girlfriend" in her Introduction to Modern Drama class).

Wesley supposed his reaction to Henderson's Kindle would help them with that.

"Mr. Henderson," he said, "there will always be books. Which means there will always be paper and binding. Books are *real objects*. Books are *friends*."

"Yeah, but!" Henderson had replied, his sweet smile now becoming slightly sly.

"But?"

"They're also ideas and emotions. You said so in our first class."

"Well," Wesley had said, "you've got me there. But books aren't *solely* ideas. Books have a smell, for instance. One that gets better—more nostalgic—as the years go by. Does this gadget of yours have a smell?"

"Nope," Henderson replied. "Not really. But when you turn the pages…here, with this button…they kind of flutter, like in a real book, and I can go to any page I want, and when it sleeps, it shows pictures of famous writers, and it holds a charge, and—"

"It's a computer," Wesley had said. "You're reading off the computer."

The Henderson kid had taken his Kindle back. "You say that like it's a bad thing. It's still 'Paul's Case.'"

"You've never heard of a Kindle, Mr. Smith?" Josie Quinn had asked. Her tone was that of a kindly anthropologist asking a member of New Guinea's Kombai tribe if he had ever heard of electric stoves and elevator shoes.

"No," he said, not because it was true—he *had* seen something called SHOP THE KINDLE STORE when he bought books from Amazon online—but because, on the whole, he thought he would prefer being perceived by them as Old School. New School was somehow…mediocre.

"You ought to get one," the Henderson kid said, and when Wesley had replied, without even thinking, "Perhaps I will," the class had broken into spontaneous applause. For the first time since Ellen's departure, Wesley had felt faintly cheered. Because they wanted him to get a book-reading

gadget, and also because the applause suggested they did see him as Old School. *Teachable* Old School.

He did not seriously consider buying a Kindle (if he was Old School, then books were definitely the way to go) until a couple of weeks later. One day on his way home from school he imagined Ellen seeing him with his Kindle, just strolling across the quad and bopping his finger on the little NEXT PAGE button.

What in the world are you doing? she would ask. Speaking to him at last.

Reading off the computer, he would say. *Just like the rest of you.*

Spiteful!

But, as the Henderson kid might put it, was that a bad thing? It occurred to him that spite was a kind of methadone for lovers. Was it better to go cold turkey? Perhaps not.

When he got home he turned on his desktop Dell (he owned no laptop and took pride in the fact) and went to the Amazon website. He had expected the gadget to go for four hundred dollars or so, maybe more if there was a Cadillac model, and was surprised to find it was cheaper than that. Then he went to the Kindle Store (which he had been so successfully ignoring) and discovered that the Henderson kid was right: the books were ridiculously cheap, hardcover novels (*what* cover, ha-ha) priced below most trade paperbacks. Considering what he spent on books, the Kindle might pay for itself. As for the reaction of his colleagues—all those hoicked eyebrows—Wesley discovered he relished the prospect. Which led to an interesting insight into human nature, or at least the human nature of the academic: one liked to be perceived by one's students as Old School, but by one's peers as NewSchool.

I'm experimenting with new technology, he imagined himself saying.

He liked the sound of it. It was NewSchool all the way.

He also liked thinking of Ellen's reaction. He had stopped leaving messages on her phone, and he had begun avoiding places—The Pit Stop, Harry's Pizza—where he might run into her, but that could change. Surely

I’m reading off the computer, just like the rest of you was too good a line to waste.

Oh, that’s small, he scolded himself as he sat in front of his computer, looking at the picture of the Kindle.*That is spite so small it probably wouldn’t poison a newborn kitten*.

True! But if it was the only spite of which he was capable, why not indulge it?

So he had clicked on the Buy Kindle box, and the gadget had arrived a day later, in a box stamped with the smile logo and the words ONE-DAY DELIVERY. Wesley hadn’t opted for one-day, and would protest that charge if it showed up on his MasterCard bill, but he had unpacked his new acquisition with real pleasure—similar to the pleasure he felt when unpacking a box of books, but sharper. Because there was that sense of heading into the unknown, he supposed. Not that he expected the Kindle to replace books, or to be much more than a novelty item, really; an attention-getter for a few weeks or months that would afterward stand forgotten and gathering dust beside the Rubik’s Cube on the knickknack shelf in his living room.

It didn’t strike him as peculiar that, whereas the Henderson kid’s Kindle had been white, his was pink.

Not then.

II—Ur Functions

When Wesley got back to his apartment after his confessional conversation with Don Allman, the message light on his answering machine was blinking. Two messages. He pushed the playback button, expecting to hear his mother complaining about her arthritis and making trenchant observations about how some sons actually called home more often than twice a month. After that would come a robo-call from the Moore*Echo*, reminding him—for the dozenth time—that his subscription had lapsed. But it wasn’t his mother and it wasn’t the newspaper. When he heard Ellen’s voice, he paused in the act of reaching for a beer and listened bent-over, with one hand outstretched in the fridge’s frosty glow.

“Hi, Wes,” she said, sounding uncharacteristically unsure of herself. There was a long pause, long enough for Wesley to wonder if that was all there was going to be. In the background he heard hollow shouts and bouncing balls. She was in the gym, or had been when she left the message. “I’ve been thinking about us. Thinking that maybe we should try again. I miss you.” And then, as if she had seen him rushing for the door: “But not yet. I need to think a little more about…what you said.” A pause. “I was wrong to throw your book like that, but I was upset.” Another pause, almost as long as the one after she’d said hi. “There’s a pre-season tourney in Lexington this weekend. You know, the one they call the Bluegrass. It’s a big deal. Maybe when I get back, we should talk. Please don’t call me until then, because I’ve got to concentrate on the girls. Defense is terrible, and I’ve only got one girl who can actually shoot from the perimeter, and…I don’t know, this is probably a big mistake.”

“It’s not,” he told the answering machine. His heart was pumping. He was still leaning into the open refrigerator, feeling the cold wafting out and striking his face, which seemed too hot. “Believe me, it’s not.”

“I had lunch with Suzanne Montanari the other day, and she says you’re carrying around one of those electronic reading thingies. To me that seemed…I don’t know, like a sign that we should try again.” She laughed, then screamed so loud that Wesley jumped. “*Chase down that loose ball! You either run or you sit!*” Then: “Sorry. I’ve got to go. Don’t call me. I’ll call you. One way or the other. After the Bluegrass. I’m sorry I’ve been dodging your calls, but…you hurt my feelings, Wes. Coaches have feelings too, you know. I—”

A beep interrupted her. The allotted message time had run out. Wesley uttered the word Norman Mailer’s publishers had refused to let him use in *The Naked and the Dead*.

Then the second message started and she was back. “I guess English teachers also have feelings. Suzanne says we’re not right for each other, she says we’re too far apart in our interests, but…maybe there’s a middle ground. I’m glad you got the reader. If it’s a Kindle, I think you can also use

it to go to the Internet. I…I need to think about this. Don’t call me. I’m not quite ready. Goodbye.”

Wesley got his beer. He was smiling. Then he thought of the spite that had been living in his heart for the last month and stopped. He went to the calendar on the wall, and wrote PRE-SEASON TOURNEY across Saturday and Sunday. He paused, then drew a line through the days of the work-week after, a line on which he wrote ELLEN???

With that done he sat down in his favorite chair, drank his beer, and tried to read *2666*. It was a crazy book, but sort of interesting.

He wondered if it was available from the Kindle Store.

.

That evening, after replaying Ellen’s messages for the third time, Wesley turned on his Dell and went to the Athletic Department website to check for details concerning the Bluegrass Pre-Season Invitational Tournament. He knew it would be a mistake to turn up there, and he had no intentions of doing so, but he did want to know who the Meerkats were playing, what their chances were, and when Ellen would be back.

It turned out there were eight teams, seven from Division Two and only one from Division Three: the Lady Meerkats of Moore. Wesley felt pride on Ellen’s behalf when he saw that, and was once more ashamed of his spite…which she (lucky him!) knew nothing about. She actually seemed to think he had bought the Kindle as a way of sending her a message: *Maybe you’re right, and maybe I can change. Maybe we both can.* He supposed that if things went well, he would in time come to convince himself that was indeed so.

On the website he saw that the team would leave for Lexington by bus at noon this coming Friday. They would practice at Rupp Arena that evening, and play their first game—against the Bulldogs of Truman State, Indiana—on Saturday morning. Because the tourney was double elimination, they wouldn’t be starting back until Sunday evening no matter

what. Which meant he wouldn't hear from her until the following Monday at the earliest.

It was going to be a long week.

"And," he told his computer (a good listener!), "she may decide against trying again, anyway. I have to be prepared for that."

Well, he could try. And he could also call that bitch Suzanne Montanari and tell her in no uncertain terms to stop campaigning against him. Why would she do that in the first place? She was a *colleague*, for God's sake!

Only if he did that, Suzanne might carry tales straight back to her friend (*friend?* who knew? who even suspected?) Ellen. It might be best to leave that aspect of things alone. Although the spite wasn't entirely out of his heart after all, it seemed. Now it was directed at Ms. Montanari.

"Never mind," he told his computer. "George Herbert was wrong. Living well isn't the best revenge; loving well is."

He started to turn off his computer, then remembered something Don Allman had said about Wesley's Kindle: *I thought they only came in white.* Certainly the Henderson kid's had been white, but—what was the saying?—one swallow didn't make a summer. After a few false starts (Google, full of information but essentially dumb as a post, lead him first to a discussion of whether or not the Kindle would ever be able to produce color images on its screen, a subject in which Wesley—as a book-reader—had absolutely zero interest), he thought to search for Kindle Fan Sites. He found one called The Kindle Kandle. At the top was a bizarre photo of a woman in Quaker garb reading her Kindle by candlelight. Or possibly kandlelight. Here he read several posts—complaints, mostly—about how the Kindle came in only one color, which one blogger called "plain old smudge-friendly white." Below it was a reply suggesting that if the complainer persisted in reading with dirty fingers, he could buy a custom sleeve for his Kindle. "In any color you like," she added. "Grow up and show some creativity!"

Wesley turned off his computer, went into the kitchen, got another beer, and pulled his own Kindle from his briefcase. His pink Kindle. Except for the color, it looked exactly the same as the ones on the Kindle Kandle website.

"Kindle-Kandle, bibble-babble," he said. "It's just some flaw in the plastic." Perhaps, but why had it come one-day express delivery when he hadn't specified that? Because someone at the Kindle factory wanted to get rid of the pink mutant as soon as possible? That was ridiculous. They would have just thrown it away. Another victim of quality control.

He thought of Ellen's message again (by then he had it by heart). *If it's a Kindle, I think you can use it to go to the Internet*, she'd said. He wondered if it was true. He turned the Kindle on, and as he did so, he remembered there was something else odd about it: no instruction booklet. He hadn't questioned that until now, because the device was so simple to use it practically ran itself (a creepy idea, when you considered it). He thought of going back to the Kindle Kandlers to find out if this was a *true* oddity, then dismissed the idea. He was just goofing around, after all, beginning to while away the hours between now and next Monday, when he might hear from Ellen again.

"I miss you, kiddo," he said, and was surprised to hear his voice waver. He did miss her. He hadn't realized how much until he'd heard her voice. He'd been too wrapped up in his own wounded ego. Not to mention his sweaty little spite. Strange to think that spite might have earned him a second chance. Much stranger, when you got right down to it, than a pink Kindle.

The screen titled *Wesley's Kindle* booted up. Listed were the books he had so far purchased—

Revolutionary Road

, by Richard Yates, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, by Hemingway. The gadget had come with *The New Oxford American Dictionary* pre-loaded. You only had to begin typing your word and the Kindle found it for you. It was, he thought, TiVo for smart people.

The question was, could you access the Internet?

He pushed the MENU button and was presented with a number of choices. The top one (of course) invited him to SHOP THE KINDLE STORE. But near the bottom was something called EXPERIMENTAL. That looked interesting. He moved the cursor to it, opened it, and read this at the top of the screen: *We are working on these experimental prototypes. Do you find them useful?*

"Well, I don't know," Wesley said. "What are they?"

The first prototype turned out to be BASIC WEB. So Ellen was right. The Kindle was apparently a lot more computerized than it looked at first blush. He glanced at the other experimental choices: music downloads (big whoop) and text-to-speech (which might come in handy if he were blind). He pushed the NEXT PAGE button to see if there were other experimental prototypes. There was one: UR FUNCTIONS.

Now what in the hell was that? Ur, so far as he knew, had only two meanings: a city in the Old Testament, and a prefix meaning "primitive" or "basic." The screen didn't help; although there were explanations for the other experimental functions, there was none for this. Well, there was one way to find out. He highlighted UR FUNCTIONS and selected it.

A new menu appeared. There were three items: UR BOOKS, UR NEWS ARCHIVE, and UR LOCAL (UNDER CONSTRUCTION).

"Huh," Wesley said. "What in the *world*."

He highlighted UR BOOKS, dropped his finger onto the select button, then hesitated. Suddenly his skin felt cold, as when he'd been stilled by the sound of Ellen's recorded voice while reaching into the fridge for a beer. He would later think, *It was my own ur. Something basic and primitive deep inside, telling me not to do it*.

But was he not a modern man? One who now read off the computer?

He was. He was. So he pushed the button.

The screen blanked, then WELCOME TO UR BOOKS! appeared at the top of the screen…and in red! The Kandlers were behind the technological curve, it seemed; there *was* Kolor on the Kindle. Beneath the

welcome message was a picture—not of Charles Dickens or Eudora Welty, but of a large black tower. There was something ominous about it. Below, also in red, was an invitation to *Select Author (your choice may not be available)*. And below that, a blinking cursor.

"What the hell," Wesley told the empty room. He licked his lips, which were suddenly dry, and typed ERNEST HEMINGWAY.

The screen wiped itself clean. The function, whatever it was supposed to be, didn't seem to work. After ten seconds or so, Wesley reached for the Kindle, meaning to turn it off. Before he could push the slide-switch, the screen finally produced a new message.

10,438,721 URS SEARCHED
17,894 ERNEST HEMINGWAY TITLES DETECTED
IF YOU DO NOT KNOW TITLE, SELECT UR
OR RETURN TO UR FUNCTIONS MENU
SELECTIONS FROM YOUR CURRENT UR WILL NOT BE DISPLAYED

"What in the name of God is *this*?" Wesley whispered. Below the message, the cursor blinked. Above it, in small type (black, not red), was one further instruction: NUMERIC ENTRY ONLY. NO COMMAS OR DASHES. YOUR CURRENT UR: **117586**.

Wesley felt a strong urge (an *ur* urge!) to turn the pink Kindle off and drop it into the silverware drawer. Or into the freezer along with the ice cream and Stouffer's frozen dinners, that might be even better. Instead, he used the teeny-tiny keypad to enter his birth date. 7191974 would do as well as any number, he reckoned. He hesitated again, then plunged the tip of his index finger down on the select button. When the screen blanked this time, he had to fight an impulse to get up from the kitchen chair he was sitting in and back away from the table. A crazy certainty had arisen in his mind: a hand—or perhaps a claw—was going to swim up from the grayness of the Kindle's screen, grab him by the throat, and yank him in. He would

exist forever after in computerized grayness, floating around the microchips and between the many worlds of Ur.

Then the screen produced type, plain old prosaic type, and the superstitious dread departed. He scanned the Kindle's screen (the size of a small paperback) eagerly, although what he was eager for he had no idea.

At the top was the author's full name—Ernest Miller Hemingway—and his dates. Next came a long list of his published works…but it was wrong. *The Sun Also Rises* was there…*For Whom the Bell Tolls*…the short stories…*The Old Man and the Sea*, of course…but there were also three or four titles Wesley didn't recognize, and except for minor essays, he thought he had read all of Hemingway's considerable output. Also…

He examined the dates again and saw that the death-date was wrong. Hemingway had died on July 2, 1961, of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. According to the screen, he had gone to that great library in the sky on August 19, 1964.

"Birth date's wrong, too," Wesley muttered. He was running his free hand through his hair, pulling it into exotic new shapes. "I'm almost sure it is. Should be 1899, not 1897."

He moved the cursor down to one of the titles he didn't know: *Cortland's Dogs*. This was some lunatic computer programmer's idea of a joke, pretty much had to be, but *Cortland's Dogs* at least *sounded* like a Hemingway title. Wesley selected it.

The screen blanked, then produced a book cover. The jacket image—in black and white—showed barking dogs surrounding a scarecrow. In the background, shoulders slumped in a posture of weariness or defeat (or both), was a hunter with a gun. The eponymous Cortland, surely.

In the woods of upper Michigan, James Cortland deals with the infidelity of his wife and his own mortality. When three dangerous criminals appear at the old Cortland farm, "Papa's" most famous hero is faced with a terrible choice. Rich in event and symbolism, Ernest Hemingway's final novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize shortly before his death. $7.50

Below the thumbnail, Kindle asked: BUY THIS BOOK? Y N.

“Total bullshit,” Wesley whispered as he highlighted Y and pushed the select button.

The screen blanked again, then flashed a new message: *Ur novels may not be disseminated as according to all applicable Paradox Laws. Do you agree? Y N.*

Smiling—as befitted someone who got the joke but was going along with it anyway—Wesley selected *Y*. The screen blanked, then presented new information:

THANK YOU, WESLEY!
YOUR UR NOVEL HAS BEEN ORDERED
YOUR ACCOUNT WILL BE DEBITED $7.50
REMEMBER UR NOVELS TAKE LONGER TO DOWNLOAD
ALLOW 2-4 MINS

Wesley returned to the screen headed *Wesley’s Kindle. The same items were there—*

Revolutionary Road

, The Old Man and the Sea, the New Oxford American—and he was sure that wouldn’t change. There was no Hemingway novel called *Cortland’s Dogs*, not in this world or any other. Nonetheless, he got up and went to the phone. It was picked up on the first ring.

“Don Allman,” his office-mate said. “And yes, I was indeed born a ramblin’ man.” No hollow gym-sounds in the background this time; just the barbaric yawps of Don’s three sons, who sounded as though they might be dismantling the Allman residence board by board.

“Don, it’s Wesley.”

“Ah, Wesley! I haven’t seen you in…gee, it must be three hours!” From deeper within the lunatic asylum where Wesley assumed Don lived with his family, there came what sounded like a death-scream. Don Allman was not perturbed. “Jason, don’t throw that at your brother. Be a good little troll and go watch SpongeBob.” Then, to Wesley: “What can I do for you,

Wes? Advice on your love-life? Tips on improving your sexual performance and stamina? A title for your novel in progress?"

"I have no novel in progress and you know it," Wesley snapped. "But it's novels I want to talk about. You know Hemingway's *oeuvre*, don't you?"

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"Do you or don't you?"

"Of course. But not as well as you, I hope. You're the 20th century American lit man, after all; I stick to the days when writers wore wigs, took snuff, and said picturesque things like *ecod* and *damme*. What's on your mind?"

"To your knowledge, did Hemingway ever write any fiction about dogs?"

Don considered while another young child commenced shrieking. "Wes, are you okay? You sound a little—"

"Just answer the question. Did he or didn't he?" *Highlight Y or N*, Wesley thought.

"All right," Don said. "So far as I can say without consulting my trusty computer, he didn't. I remember him once claiming the Batista partisans clubbed his pet pooch to death, though—how's that for a factoid? You know, when he was in Cuba. He took it as a sign that he and Mary should beat feet to Florida, and they did—posthaste."

"You don't happen to remember that dog's name, do you?"

"I think I do. I'd want to double-check it on the Internet, but I think it was Cortland. Like the apple?"

"Thanks, Don." His lips felt numb. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wes, are you sure you're…*FRANKIE, PUT THAT DOWN! DON'T* —" There was a crash. "Shit. I think that was Delft. I gotta go, Wes. See you tomorrow."

"Right."

Wesley went back to the kitchen table. He saw that a fresh selection now appeared on the contents page of his Kindle. A novel (or *something*)

called *Cortland's Dogs* had been downloaded from…

Where, exactly? Some other plane of reality called Ur (or possibly UR) 7,191,974?

Wesley no longer had the strength to call this idea ridiculous and push it away. He did, however, have enough to go to the refrigerator and get a beer. Which he needed. He opened it, drank half in five long swallows, belched. He sat down, feeling a little better. He highlighted his new acquisition ($7.50 would be mighty cheap for an undiscovered Hemingway, he reckoned) and a title page came up. The next page was a dedication: *To Sy, and to Mary, with love.* Then this:

Chapter 1

A man's life was five dogs long, Cortland believed. The first was the one that taught you. The second was the one you taught. The third and fourth were the ones you worked. The last was the one that outlived you. That was the winter dog. Cortland's winter dog had no name. He thought of it only as the scarecrow dog…

Liquid rose up in Wesley's throat. He ran for the sink, bent over it, and struggled to keep the beer down. His gorge settled, and instead of turning on the water to rinse puke down the drain, he cupped his hands under the flow and splashed it on his sweaty skin. That was better.

Then he went back to the Kindle and stared down at it.

A man's life was five dogs long, Cortland believed.

Somewhere—at some college a lot more ambitious than Moore of Kentucky—there was a computer programmed to read books and identify the writers by their stylistic tics and tocks, which were supposed to be as unique as fingerprints or snowflakes. Wesley had a vague recollection that this computer program had been used to identify the author of a pseudonymous novel called *Primary Colors*; the program had whiffled through thousands of writers in a matter of hours or days and had come up with a newsmagazine columnist named Joe Klein, who later owned up to his literary paternity.

Wesley thought that if he submitted *Cortland's Dogs* to that computer, it would spit out Ernest Hemingway's name. In truth, he didn't think he needed a computer.

He picked up the Kindle with hands that were now shaking badly. "What *are* you?" he asked.

The Kindle did not answer.

III—Wesley Refuses to Go Mad

In a real dark night of the soul, Scott Fitzgerald had said, *it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day.*

At three o'clock on that Tuesday morning, Wesley lay feverishly awake, wondering if he might be cracking up himself. He had forced himself to turn off the pink Kindle and put it back in his briefcase an hour ago, but its hold over him remained every bit as strong as it had been at midnight, when he had still been deep in the UR BOOKS menu.

He had searched for Ernest Hemingway in two dozen of the Kindle's almost ten and a half million Urs, and had come up with at least twenty novels he had never heard of. In one of the Urs (it happened to be 6,201,949—which, when broken down, was his mother's birth date), Hemingway appeared to have been a crime writer. Wesley had downloaded a title called *It's Blood, My Darling!*, and discovered your basic dime novel…but written in staccato, punchy sentences he would have recognized anywhere.

Hemingway sentences.

And even as a crime writer, Hemingway had departed from gang wars and cheating, gore-happy debs long enough to write *A Farewell to Arms*. He *always* wrote *A Farewell to Arms*, it seemed; other titles came and went, but *A Farewell to Arms* was always there and *The Old Man and the Sea* was *usually* there.

He tried Faulkner.

Faulkner was not there at all, in any of the Urs.

He checked the regular menu, and discovered that Faulkner was not available in what he was coming to think of as his reality, either, at least not

in Kindle editions. Only a few books about American literature's Count No'count.

He checked Roberto Bolano, the author of *2666*, and although it wasn't available from the normal Kindle menu, it was listed in several UR BOOKS sub-menus. So were other Bolano novels, including (in Ur 101) a book with the colorful title *Marilyn Blows Fidel*. He almost downloaded that one, then changed his mind. So many authors, so many Urs, so little time.

A part of his mind—distant yet authentically terrified—continued to insist it was all an elaborate joke which had arisen from some degenerate computer programmer's lunatic imagination. Yet the evidence, which he continued to compile as that long night progressed, suggested otherwise.

James Cain, for instance. In one Ur Wesley checked, he had died exceedingly young, producing only two books: *Nightfall* (a new one) and *Mildred Pierce* (an oldie). Wesley would have bet on *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to have been a Cain constant—his ur-novel, so to speak—but no. Although he checked a dozen Urs for Cain, he found *Postman* only once.*Mildred Pierce*, on the other hand—which he considered very minor Cain, indeed—was always there. Like *A Farewell to Arms*.

He had checked his own name, and discovered what he feared: although the Urs were lousy with Wesley Smiths (one appeared to be a writer of Westerns, another the author of porno novels such as *Hot Tub Honey*), none seemed to be him. Of course it was hard to be a hundred per cent sure, but it appeared that he had stumbled on 10.4 million alternate realities and he was an unpublished loser in all of them.

Wide awake in his bed, listening to one lonely dog bark in the distance, Wesley began to shiver. His own literary aspirations seemed very minor to him at this moment. What seemed major—what loomed over his life and very sanity—were the riches hidden within that slim pink panel of plastic. He thought of all the writers whose passing he had mourned, from Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow to Donald Westlake and Evan Hunter; one after another, Thanatos stilled the magic voices and they spoke no more.

But now they could.

They could speak to him.

He threw back the bedclothes. The Kindle was calling him. Not in a human voice, but in an organic one. It sounded like a beating heart, Poe's tell-tale heart, coming from inside his briefcase instead of from under the floorboards, and—

Poe!

Good God, he had never checked Poe!

He had left his briefcase in its accustomed spot beside his favorite chair. He hurried to it, opened it, grabbed the Kindle, and plugged it in (no way he was going to risk running down the battery). He hurried to UR BOOKS, typed in Poe's name, and on his first try found an Ur—2,555,676—where Poe had lived until 1875 instead of dying in 1849, at the age of forty. And this version of Poe had written novels! Six of them! Greed filled Wesley's heart (his mostly *kind* heart) as his eyes raced over the titles.

One was called *The House of Shame, or Degradation's Price.* Wesley downloaded it—the charge for this one was only $4.95—and read until dawn. Then he turned off the pink Kindle, put his head in his arms, and slept for two hours at the kitchen table.

He also dreamed. No images; only words. Titles! Endless lines of titles, many of them of undiscovered masterpieces. As many titles as there were stars in the sky.

•

He got through Tuesday and Wednesday—somehow—but during his Intro to American Lit class on Thursday, lack of sleep and overexcitement caught up with him. Not to mention his increasingly tenuous hold on reality. Halfway through his Mississippi Lecture (which he usually gave with a high degree of cogency) about how Hemingway was downriver from Twain, and almost all of twentieth century American fiction was downriver from Hemingway, he realized he was telling the class that Papa had never written a great story about dogs, but if he had lived, he surely would have.

“Something more nutritious than *Marley and Me*,” he said, and laughed with unnerving good cheer.

He turned from the blackboard and saw twenty-two pairs of eyes looking at him with varying degrees of concern, perplexity, and amusement. He heard a whisper, low, but as clear as the beating of the old man’s heart to the ears of Poe’s mad narrator: “Smithy’s losin’ it.”

Smithy wasn’t, but there could be no doubt that he was in *danger* of losing it.

I refuse, he thought. *I refuse, I refuse.* And realized, to his horror, that he was actually muttering this under his breath.

The Henderson kid, who sat in the first row, had heard it. “Mr. Smith?” A hesitation. “Sir? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said. “No. A touch of the bug, maybe.” *Poe’s gold-bug*, he thought, and barely restrained himself from bursting into wild cackles. “Class dismissed. Go on, get out of here.”

And, as they scrambled for the door, he had presence of mind enough to add: “Raymond Carver next week! Don’t forget! *Where I’m Calling From*!”

And thought: *What else is there by Raymond Carver in the worlds of Ur? Is there one—or a dozen, or a thousand—where he quit smoking, lived to be seventy, and wrote another half a dozen books?*

He sat down at his desk, reached for his briefcase with the pink Kindle inside, then pulled his hand back. He reached again, stopped himself again, and moaned. It was like a drug. Or a sexual obsession. Thinking of that made him think of Ellen Silverman, something he hadn’t done since discovering the Kindle’s hidden menus. For the first time since she’d walked out, Ellen had completely slipped his mind.

Ironic, isn’t it? Now I’m reading off the computer, Ellen, and I can’t stop.

“I refuse to spend the rest of the day looking into that thing,” he said, “and I refuse to go mad. I refuse to look, and I refuse to go mad. To look or go mad. I refuse both. I—”

But the pink Kindle was in his hand! He had taken it out even as he had been denying its power over him! When had he done that? And did he really intend to sit here in this empty classroom, mooning over it?

“Mr. Smith?”

The voice startled him so badly that he dropped the Kindle on his desk. He snatched it up at once and examined it, terrified it might be broken, but it was all right. Thank God.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” It was the Henderson kid, standing in the doorway and looking concerned. This didn’t surprise Wesley much. *If I saw me right now, I’d probably be concerned, too*.

“Oh, you didn’t startle me,” Wesley said. This obvious lie struck him as funny, and he gave voice to a glassy giggle. He clapped his hand over his mouth to hold it in.

“What’s wrong?” The Henderson kid took a step inside. “I think it’s more than a virus. Man, you look awful. Did you get some bad news, or something?”

Wesley almost told him to mind his business, peddle his papers, put an egg in his shoe and beat it, but then the terrified part of him that had been cowering in the farthest corner of his brain, insisting that the pink Kindle was a prank or the opening gambit of some elaborate con, decided to stop hiding and start acting.

If you really refuse to go mad, you better do something about this, it said. *So how about it?*

“What’s your first name, Mr. Henderson? It’s entirely slipped my mind.”

The kid smiled. A pleasant smile, but the concern was still in his eyes. “Robert, sir. Robbie.”

“Well, Robbie, I’m Wes. And I want to show you something. Either you will see nothing—which means I’m deluded, and very likely suffering a nervous breakdown—or you will see something that completely blows your mind. But not here. Come to my office, would you?”

Henderson tried to ask questions as they crossed the mediocre quad. Wesley shook them off, but he was glad Robbie Henderson had come back, and glad that the terrified part of his mind had taken the initiative and spoken up. He felt better about the Kindle—*safer*—than he had since discovering the hidden menus. In a fantasy story, Robbie Henderson would see nothing and the protagonist would decide he was going insane. Or had already gone. Reality seemed to be different. *His* reality, at least, Wesley Smith's Ur.

I actually want it to be a delusion. Because if it is, and if with this young man's help I can recognize it as such, I'm sure I can avoid going mad. And I refuse to go mad.

"You're muttering sir," Robbie said. "Wes, I mean."

"Sorry."

"You're scaring me a little."

"I'm also scaring *me* a little."

Don Allman was in the office, wearing headphones, correcting papers, and singing about Jeremiah the bullfrog in a voice that went beyond the borders of merely bad and into the unexplored country of the execrable. He shut off his iPod when he saw Wesley.

"I thought you had class."

"Canceled it. This is Robert Henderson, one of my American Lit students."

"Robbie," Henderson said, extending his hand.

"Hello, Robbie. I'm Don Allman. One of the Allman Brothers. I play a mean tuba."

Robbie laughed politely and shook Don Allman's hand. Until that moment, Wesley had planned on asking Don to leave, thinking one witness to his mental collapse would be enough. But maybe this was that rare case where the more really was the merrier.

"Need some privacy?" Don asked.

"No," Wesley said. "Stay. I want to show you guys something. And if you see nothing and I see something, I'll be delighted to check into Central

State Psychiatric.” He opened his briefcase.

“Whoa!” Robbie exclaimed. “A pink Kindle! Sweet! I’ve never seen one of those before!”

“Now I’m going to show you something else that you’ve never seen before,” Wesley said. “At least, I think I am.”

He plugged in the Kindle and turned it on.

.

What convinced Don Allman was the *Collected Works of William Shakespeare* from Ur 17,000. After downloading it at Don’s request—because in this particular Ur, Shakespeare had died in 1620 instead of 1616—the three men discovered two new plays. One was titled *Two Ladies of Hampshire*, a comedy that seemed to have been written soon after *Julius Caesar*. The other was a tragedy called *A Black Fellow in London*, written in 1619. Wesley opened this one and then (with some reluctance) handed Don the Kindle.

Don Allman was ordinarily a ruddy-cheeked guy who smiled a lot, but as he paged through Acts I and II of *A Black Fellow in London*, he lost both his smile and his color. After twenty minutes, during which Wesley and Robbie sat watching him silently, he pushed the Kindle back to Wesley. He did it with the tips of his fingers, as if he really didn’t want to touch it at all.

“So?” Wesley asked. “What’s the verdict?”

“It could be an imitation,” Don said, “but of course there have always been scholars who claimed that Shakespeare’s plays weren’t written by Shakespeare. There are supporters of Christopher Marlowe…Francis Bacon…even the Earl of Darby…”

“Yeah, and James Frey wrote *Macbeth*,” Wesley said. “What do *you* think?”

“I think this could be authentic Willie,” Don said. He sounded on the verge of tears. Or laughter. Maybe both. “I think it’s far too elaborate to be a joke. And if it’s a hoax, I have no idea how it works.” He reached a finger

to the Kindle, touched it lightly, then pulled it away. “I’d have to study both plays closely, with reference works at hand, to be more definite, but…it’s got his *lilt*.”

Robbie Henderson, it turned out, had read almost all of John D. MacDonald’s mystery and suspense novels. In the Ur 2,171,753 listing of MacDonald’s works, he found seventeen novels in what was called “the Dave Higgins series.” All the titles had colors in them.

“That part’s right,” Robbie said, “but the titles are all wrong. And John D’s series character was named Travis McGee, not Dave Higgins.”

Wesley downloaded one called *The Blue Lament*, hitting his credit card with another $4.50 charge, and pushed the Kindle over to Robbie once the book had been downloaded to the ever-growing library that was *Wesley’s Kindle*. While Robbie read, at first from the beginning and then skipping around, Don went down to the main office and brought back three coffees. Before settling in behind his desk, he hung the little-used CONFERENCE IN PROGRESS DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.

Robbie looked up, nearly as pale as Don had been after dipping into the never-written Shakespeare play about the African prince who is brought to London in chains.

“This is a lot like a Travis McGee novel called *Pale Gray for Guilt*,” he said. “Only Travis McGee lives in Fort Lauderdale, and this guy Higgins lives in Sarasota. McGee has a friend named Meyer—a guy—and Higgins has a friend named Sarah…” He bent over the Kindle for a moment. “Sarah Mayer.” He looked at Wesley, his eyes showing too much white around the irises. “Jesus Christ, and there’s *ten million* of these…these other worlds?”

“Ten million, four hundred thousand and some, according to the UR BOOKS menu,” Wesley said. “I think exploring even one author fully would take more years than you have left in your life, Robbie.”

“I could die today,” Robbie Henderson said in a low voice. “That thing could give me a freaking heart attack.” He abruptly seized his Styrofoam cup of coffee and swallowed most of the contents, although the coffee was still steaming.

Wesley, on the other hand, felt almost like himself again. But with the fear of madness removed, a host of questions were cramming his mind. Only one seemed completely relevant. “So what do I do now?”

“For one thing,” Dan said, “this has to stay a dead secret among the three of us.” He turned to Robbie. “Can you keep a secret? Say no and I’ll have to kill you.”

“I can keep one. But how about the people who sent it to you, Wes? Can *they* keep a secret? *Will* they?”

“How do I know that when I don’t know who they are?”

“What credit card did you use when you ordered Little Pink here?”

“MasterCard. It’s the only one I use these days.”

Robbie pointed to the English Department computer terminal Wesley and Don shared. “Go online, why don’t you, and check your account. If those…those ur-books came from Amazon, I’ll be very surprised.”

“Where else *could* they have come from?” Wesley asked. “It’s their gadget, they sell the books for it. Also, it came in an Amazon box. It had the smile on it.”

“And do they sell their gadget in Glowstick Pink?” Robbie asked.

“Well, no.”

“Dude, check your credit card account.”

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Wesley drummed his fingers on Don’s Mighty Mouse mousepad as the office’s outdated PC cogitated. Then he sat up straight and began to read.

“Well?” Don asked. “Share.”

“According to this,” Wesley said, “my latest MasterCard purchase was a blazer from Men’s Warehouse. A week ago. No downloaded books.”

“Not even the ones you ordered the normal way? *The Old Man and the Sea* and

Revolutionary Road

?”

“Nope.”

Robbie asked, “What about the Kindle itself?”

Wesley scrolled back. “Nothing…nothing…noth…wait, here it—” He leaned forward until his nose was almost touching the screen. “I’ll be damned.”

“What?” Don and Robbie said it together.

“According to this, my purchase was denied. It says, ‘wrong credit-card number.’” He considered. “That could be. I’m always reversing two of the digits, sometimes even when I have the damn card right beside the keyboard. I’m a little dyslexic.”

“But the order went through, anyway,” Don said thoughtfully. “Somehow…to some*one*. *Somewhere*. What Ur does the Kindle say we’re in? Refresh me on that.”

Wesley went back to the relevant screen. “117,586. Only to enter that as a choice, you omit the comma.”

Don said, “That might not be the Ur we’re living in, but I bet it was the Ur this Kindle came from. In *that* Ur, the MasterCard number you gave is the right one for the Wesley Smith that exists there.”

“What are the odds of something like that happening?” Robbie asked.

“I don’t know,” Don said, “but probably a lot steeper than 10.4 million to one.”

Wesley opened his mouth to say something, and was interrupted by a fusillade of knocks on the door. They all jumped. Don Allman actually uttered a little scream.

“Who is it?” Wesley asked, grabbing the Kindle and holding it protectively to his chest.

“Janitor,” the voice on the other side of the door said. “You folks ever going home? It’s almost seven o’clock, and I need to lock up the building.”

IV—News Archive

They weren’t done, couldn’t be done. Not yet. Wesley in particular was anxious to press on. Although he hadn’t slept for more than three hours at a stretch in days, he felt wide awake, energized. He and Robbie walked

back to his apartment while Don went home to help his wife put the boys to bed. When that was done, he'd join them at Wesley's place for an extended skull-session. Wesley said he'd order some food.

"Good," Don said, "but be careful. Ur-Chinese just doesn't taste the same."

For a wonder, Wesley found he could actually laugh.

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"So this is what an English instructor's apartment looks like," Robbie said, gazing around. "Man, I dig all the books."

"Good," Wesley said. "I loan to people who bring back. Keep it in mind."

"I will. My parents have never been, you know, great readers. Few magazines, some diet books, a self-help manual or two…that's all. I might have been the same way, if not for you. Just bangin' my head out on the football field, you know, with nothing ahead except maybe teaching PE in GilesCounty. That's in Tennessee. Yeehaw."

Wesley was touched by this. Probably because he'd been hurled through so many emotional hoops just lately. "Thanks," he said. "Just remember, there's nothing wrong with a good loud yeehaw. That's part of who you are, too. Both parts are equally valid."

He thought of Ellen, ripping *Deliverance* out of his hands and hurling across the room. And why? Because she hated books? No, because he hadn't been listening when she needed him to. Hadn't it been Fritz Leiber, the great fantasist and science fiction writer, who had called books "the scholar's mistress?" And when Ellen needed him, hadn't he had been in the arms of his other lover, the one who made no demands (other than on his vocabulary) and always took him in?

"Wes? What were those other things on the UR FUNCTIONS menu?"

At first Wesley didn't know what the kid was talking about. Then he remembered that there *had* been a couple of other items. He'd been so

fixated on the BOOKS sub-menu that he had forgotten the other two.

"Well, let's see," he said, and turned the Kindle on. Every time he did this, he expected either the EXPERIMENTAL menu or the UR FUNCTIONS menu to be gone—that would also happen in a fantasy story or a *Twilight Zone* episode—but they were still right there.

"UR NEWS ARCHIVE and UR LOCAL," Robbie said. "Huh. UR LOCAL's under construction. Better watch out, traffic fines double."

"What?"

"Never mind, just goofin witcha. Try the news archive."

Wesley selected it. The screen blanked. After a few moments, a message appeared.

WELCOME TO THE NEWS ARCHIVE!
ONLY THE NEW YORK *TIMES* IS AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME
YOUR PRICE IS $1.00/4 DOWNLOADS
$10/50 DOWNLOADS
$100/800 DOWNLOADS
SELECT WITH CURSOR YOUR ACCOUNT WILL BE BILLED

Wesley looked at Robbie, who shrugged. "I can't tell you what to do, but if *my* credit card wasn't being billed—in this world, anyway—I'd spend the hundred."

Wesley thought he had a point, although he wondered what the other Wesley (if indeed there was one) was going to think when he opened his next MasterCard bill. He highlighted the $100/800 line and pushed the select button. This time the Paradox Laws didn't come up. Instead, the new message invited him to CHOOSE DATE AND UR. USE APPROPRIATE FIELDS.

"You do it," he said, and pushed the Kindle across the kitchen table to Robbie. This was getting easier to do, and he was glad. An obsession about keeping the Kindle in his own hands was a complication he didn't need, understandable as it was.

Robbie thought for a moment, then typed in January 21, 2009. In the Ur field he selected 1000000. “Ur one million,” he said. “Why not?” And pushed the button.

The screen went blank, then produced a message reading ENJOY YOUR SELECTION! A moment later the front page of the New York *Times* appeared. They bent over the screen, reading silently, until there was a knock at the door.

“That’ll be Don,” Wesley said. “I’ll let him in.”

Robbie Henderson didn’t reply. He was still transfixed.

“Getting cold out there,” Don said as he came in. “And there’s a wind knocking all the leaves off the—” He studied Wesley’s face. “What? Or should I say, what now?”

“Come and see,” Wesley said.

Don went into Wesley’s book-lined living room-study, where Robbie remained bent over the Kindle. The kid looked up and turned the screen so Don could see it. There were blank patches where the photos should have gone, each with the message IMAGE UNAVAILABLE, but the headline was big and black: **NOW IT’S HER TURN**. And below it, the subhead: ***Hillary Clinton Takes Oath, Assumes Role as 44th President***.

“Looks like she made it after all,” Wesley said. “At least in Ur 1,000,000.”

“And check out who she’s replacing,” Robbie said, and pointed to the name. It was Albert Arnold Gore.

•

An hour later, when the doorbell rang, they didn’t jump but rather looked around like men startled from a dream. Wesley went downstairs and paid the delivery guy, who had arrived with a loaded pizza from Harry’s and a six-pack of Pepsi. They ate at the kitchen table, bent over the Kindle. Wesley put away three slices himself, a personal best, with no awareness of what he was eating.

They didn’t use up the eight hundred downloads they had ordered—nowhere near it—but in the next four hours they skimmed enough stories from various Urs to make their heads ache. Wesley felt as though his *mind* were aching. From the nearly identical looks he saw on the faces of the other two—pale cheeks, avid eyes in bruised sockets, crazed hair—he guessed he wasn’t alone. Looking into one alternate reality would have been challenging enough; here were over ten million, and although most appeared to be similar, not one was exactly the same.

The inauguration of the forty-fourth President of the United States was only one example, but a powerful one. They checked it in two dozen different Urs before getting tired and moving on. Fully seventeen front pages on January 21st of 2009 announced Hillary Clinton as the new President. In fourteen of them, Bill Richardson of New Mexico was her vice president. In two, it was Joe Biden. In one it was a Senator none of them had heard of: Linwood Speck of New Jersey.

“He always says no when someone else wins the top spot,” Don said.

“Who always says no?” Robbie asked. “Obama?”

“Yeah. He always gets asked, and he always says no.”

“It’s in character,” Wesley said. “And while events change, character never seems to.”

“You can’t say that for sure,” Don said. “We have a miniscule sample compared to the…the…” He laughed feebly. “You know, the whole thing. All the worlds of Ur.”

Barack Obama had been elected in six Urs. Mitt Romney had been elected once, with John McCain as his running mate. He had run against Obama, who had been tapped after Hillary was killed in a motorcade accident late in the campaign.

They saw not a single mention of Sarah Palin. Wesley wasn’t surprised. He thought that if they stumbled on her, it would be more by luck than by probability, and not just because Mitt Romney showed up more often as the Republican nominee than John McCain did. Palin had always been an outsider, a longshot, the one nobody expected.

Robbie wanted to check the Red Sox. Wesley felt it was a waste of time, but Don came down on the kid's side, so Wesley agreed. The two of them checked the sports pages for October in ten different Urs, plugging in dates from 1918 to 2009.

"This is depressing," Robbie said after the tenth try. Don Allman agreed.

"Why?" Wesley asked. "They win lots of times."

"But there's no rhyme or reason to it," Robbie said.

"And no curse," Don said. "They always win just enough to avoid it. Which is sort of boring."

"What curse?" Wesley was mystified.

Don opened his mouth to explain, then sighed. "Never mind," he said. "It would take too long, and you wouldn't get it, anyway."

"Look on the bright side," Robbie said. "The Yankees are always there, so it isn't *all* luck."

"Yeah," Don said glumly. "The military-industrial complex of the sporting world."

"Soh-*ree*. Does anyone want that last slice?"

Don and Wes shook their heads. Robbie scarfed it and said, "Why not peek at the Big Casino, before we all decide we're nuts and check ourselves into CentralState?"

"What Big Casino might that be, Yoda?" Don asked.

"The JFK assassination," Robbie said. "Mr. Tollman says that was the seminal event of the twentieth century, even more important than the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. I thought seminal events usually happened in bed, but hey, I came to college to learn. Mr. Tollman's in the History Department."

"I know who Hugh Tollman is," Don said. "He's a goddam commie, and he never laughs at my jokes."

"But he could be right about the Kennedy assassination," Wesley said. "Let's look."

.

They pursued the John-Kennedy-in-Dallas thread until nearly eleven o'clock, while college students hooted unnoticed below them, on their way to and from the local beerpits. They checked over seventy versions of the New York *Times* for November 23rd, 1963, and although the story was never the same, one fact seemed undeniable to all of them: whether he missed Kennedy, wounded Kennedy, or killed Kennedy, it was always Lee Harvey Oswald, and he always acted alone.

"The Warren Report was right," Don said. "For once the bureaucracy did its job. I'm gobsmacked."

In some Urs, that day in November had passed with no assassination stories, either attempted or successful. Sometimes Kennedy decided not to visit Dallas after all. Sometimes he did, and his motorcade was uneventful; he arrived at the Dallas Trade Mart, gave his hundred-dollar-a-plate luncheon speech ("God, things were cheap back in the day, weren't they?" Robbie remarked), and flew off into the sunset.

This was the case in Ur 88,416. Wesley began to plug in more dates from that Ur. What he saw filled him with awe and horror and wonder and sorrow. In Ur 88,416, Kennedy had seen the folly of Vietnam and had pulled out over the vehement objections of Robert McNamara, his Secretary of Defense. McNamara quit and was replaced by a man named Bruce Palmer, who resigned his rank of U.S. Army general to take the job. The civil rights turmoil was milder than when Lyndon Johnson was President, and there were almost no riots in the American cities—partly because in Ur 88,416, Martin Luther King wasn't assassinated in Memphis or anywhere else.

In this Ur, JFK was elected for a second term. In 1968, Edmund Muskie of Maine won the Presidency in a landslide over Nelson Rockefeller. By then the outgoing President was hardly able to walk without the aid of crutches, and said his first priority was going to be major back surgery.

Robbie ignored that and fixed on a story that had to do with Kennedy's last White House party. The Beatles had played, but the concert ended early when drummer Pete Best suffered a seizure and had to be taken to Washington DC Hospital.

"Holy shit," Don whispered. "What happened to Ringo?"

"Guys," Wesley said, yawning, "I have to go to bed. I'm dying here."

"Check one more," Robbie said. "4,121,989. It's my birthday. Gotta be lucky."

But it wasn't. When Wesley selected the Ur and added a date—January 20, 1973—not quite at random, what came up instead of ENJOY YOUR SELECTION was this: NO *TIMES* THIS UR AFTER NOVEMBER 19, 1962.

"Oh my God," Wesley said, and clapped a hand to his mouth. "Dear sweet God."

"What?" Robbie asked. "What is it?"

"I think I know," Don said. He tried to take the pink Kindle.

Wesley, who guessed he had gone pale (but probably not as pale as he felt inside), put a hand over Don's. "No," he said. "I don't think I can bear it."

"Bear *what*?" Robbie nearly shouted.

"Didn't Hugh Tollman cover the Cuban Missile Crisis?" Don asked. "Or didn't you get that far yet?"

"*What* missile crisis? Was it something to do with Castro?"

Don was looking at Wesley. "I don't really want to see, either," he said, "but I won't sleep tonight unless I make sure, and I don't think you will, either."

"Okay," Wesley said, and thought—not for the first time, either—that curiosity rather than rage was the true bane of the human spirit. "You'll have to do it, though. My hands are trembling too much."

Don filled in the fields for NOVEMBER 19, 1962. The Kindle told him to enjoy his selection, but he didn't. None of them did. The headlines were stark and huge:

NYC TOLL SURPASSES 6 MILLION
MANHATTAN DECIMATED BY RADIATION
RUSSIA SAID TO BE OBLITERATED
LOSSES IN EUROPE AND ASIA “INCALCULABLE”
CHINESE LAUNCH 40 ICBMS

“Turn it off,” Robbie said in a small, sick voice. “It’s like that song says—I don’t wanna see no more.”

Don said, “Look on the bright side, you two. It seems we dodged the bullet in most of the Urs, including this one.” But his voice wasn’t quite steady.

“Robbie’s right,” Wesley said. He had discovered that the final issue of the New York *Times* in Ur 4,121,989 was only three pages long. And every article was death. “Turn it off. I wish I’d never seen the damn thing in the first place.”

“Too late now,” Robbie said. And how right he was.

•

They went downstairs together and stood on the sidewalk in front of Wesley’s building.

Main Street

was almost deserted now. The rising wind moaned around the buildings and rattled late November leaves along the sidewalks. A trio of drunk students was stumbling back toward Fraternity Row, singing what might have been “ParadiseCity.”

“I can’t tell you what to do—it’s your gadget—but if it was mine, I’d get rid of it,” Don said. “It’ll suck you in.”

Wesley thought of telling him he’d already had this idea, but didn’t. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Nope,” Don said. “I’m driving the wife and kids to Frankfort for a wonderful three-day weekend at my in-laws’. Suzy Montanari’s taking my

classes. And after this little seminar tonight, I'm delighted to be getting away. Robbie? Drop you somewhere?"

"Thanks, but no need. I share an apartment with a couple of other guys two blocks up the street. Over Susan and Nan's Place."

"Isn't that a little noisy?" Wesley asked. Susan and Nan's was the local café, and opened at six AM seven days a week.

"Most days I sleep right through it." Robbie flashed a grin. "Also, when it comes to the rent, the price is right."

"Good deal. Night, you guys," Don started for his Tercel, then turned back. "I intend to kiss my kids before I turn in. Maybe it'll help me get to sleep. That last story—" He shook his head. "I could have done without that. No offense, Robbie, but stick your birthday up your ass."

They watched his diminishing taillights and Robbie said thoughtfully, "Nobody ever told me to stick my birthday before."

"I'm sure he wouldn't want you to take it personally. And he's probably right about the Kindle, you know. It's fascinating—*too* fascinating—but useless in any practical sense."

Robbie stared at him, wide-eyed. "You're calling access to thousands of undiscovered novels by the great masters of the craft *useless*? Sheezis, what kind of English teacher are you?"

Wesley had no comeback. Especially when he knew that, late or not, he'd probably be reading more of *Cortland's Dogs* before turning in.

"Besides," Robbie said. "It might not be *entirely* useless. You could type up one of those books and send it in to a publisher, ever think of that? You know, submit it under your own name. Become the next big thing. They'd call you the heir to Vonnegut or Roth or whoever."

It was an attractive idea, especially when Wesley thought of the useless scribbles in his briefcase. But he shook his head. "It'd probably violate the Paradox Laws…whatever *they* are. More importantly, it would eat at me like acid. From the inside out." He hesitated, not wanting to sound prissy, but wanting to articulate what felt like the real reason for not doing such a thing. "I would feel ashamed."

The kid smiled. “You’re a good dude, Wesley.” They were walking in the direction of Robbie’s apartment now, the leaves rattling around their feet, a quarter moon flying through the wind-driven clouds overhead.

“You think so?”

“I do. And so does Coach Silverman.”

Wesley stopped, caught by surprise. “What do you know about me and Coach Silverman?”

“Personally? Not a thing. But you must know Josie’s on the team. Josie Quinn from class?”

“Of course I know Josie.” The one who’d sounded like a kindly anthropologist when they’d been discussing the Kindle. And yes, he *had* known she was a Lady Meerkat. Unfortunately one of the subs who usually got into the game only if it was a total blowout.

“Josie says Coach has been really sad since you and her broke up. Grouchy, too. She makes them run all the time, and kicked one girl right off the team.”

“That was before we broke up.” Thinking: *In a way that’s* why *we broke up*. “Um…does the whole team know about us?”

Robbie Henderson looked at him as though he were mad. “If Josie knows, they all know.”

“How?” Because Ellen wouldn’t have told them; briefing the team on your love-life was not a coachly thing to do.

“How do women know anything?” Robbie asked. “They just do.”

“Are you and Josie Quinn an item, Robbie?”

“We’re going in the right direction. G’night, Wes. I’m gonna sleep in tomorrow—no classes on Friday—but if you drop by Susan and Nan’s for lunch, come on up and knock on my door.”

“I might do that,” Wesley said. “Goodnight, Robbie. Thanks for being one of the Three Stooges.”

“I’d say the pleasure was all mine, but I have to think about that.”

•

Instead of reading ur-Hemingway when he got back, Wesley stuffed the Kindle in his briefcase. Then he took out the mostly blank bound notebook and ran his hand over its pretty cover. *For your book ideas*, Ellen had said, and it had to've been an expensive present. Too bad it was going to waste.

I could still write a book, he thought. *Just because I haven't in any of the other Urs doesn't mean I couldn't here.*

It was true. He could be the Sarah Palin of American letters. Because sometimes longshots came in.

Both for good and for ill.

He undressed, brushed his teeth, then called the English Department and left a message for the secretary to cancel his one morning class. "Thanks, Marilyn. Sorry to put this on you, but I think I'm coming down with the flu." He added an unconvincing cough and hung up.

He thought he would lie sleepless for hours, thinking of all those other worlds, but in the dark they seemed as unreal as actors when you saw them on a movie screen. They were big up there—often beautiful, too—but they were still only shadows thrown by light. Maybe the Ur-worlds were like that, too.

What seemed real in this post-midnight hour was the sound of the wind, the beautiful sound of the wind telling tales of Tennessee, where it had been earlier this evening. Lulled by it, Wesley fell asleep, and he slept deeply and long. There were no dreams, and when he woke up, sunshine was flooding his bedroom. For the first time since his own undergraduate days, he had slept until almost eleven in the morning.

V—Ur Local (Under Construction)

He took a long hot shower, shaved, dressed, and decided to go down to Susan and Nan's for either a late breakfast or an early lunch, whichever looked better on the menu. As for Robbie, Wesley decided he'd let the kid sleep. He'd be out practicing with the rest of the hapless football team this afternoon; surely he deserved to sleep late. It occurred to him that, if he

took a table by the window, he might see the Athletic Department bus go by as the girls set off for the Bluegrass Invitational, eighty miles away. He'd wave. Ellen wouldn't see him, but he'd do it anyway.

He took his briefcase without even thinking about it.

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He ordered the Susan's Sexy Scramble (onions, peppers, mozzarella cheese) with bacon on the side, along with coffee and juice. By the time the young waitress brought his food, he'd taken out the Kindle and was reading *Cortland's Dogs*. It was Hemingway, all right, and one terrific story.

"Kindle, isn't it?" the waitress asked. "I got one for Christmas, and I love it. I'm reading my way through all of Jodi Picoult's books."

"Oh, probably not all of them," Wesley said.

"Huh? Why not?"

"She's probably got another one done already. That's all I meant."

"And James Patterson's probably written one since he got up this morning!" she said, and went off chortling.

Wesley had pushed the MAIN MENU button while they were talking, hiding the Ur-Hemingway novel without really thinking about it. Feeling guilty about what he was reading? Afraid the waitress might get a look and start screaming *That's not real Hemingway*? Ridiculous. But just owning the pink Kindle made him feel a little bit like a crook. It wasn't his, after all, and the stuff he had downloaded wasn't really his, either, because he wasn't the one paying for it.

Maybe no one is, he thought, but didn't believe it. He thought one of the universal truths of life was that, sooner or later, someone always paid.

There was nothing especially sexy about his scramble, but it was good. Instead of going back to Cortland and his winter dog, he accessed the UR menu. The one function he hadn't peeked into was UR LOCAL. Which was UNDER CONSTRUCTION. What had Robbie said about that last night? *Better watch out, traffic fines double.* The kid was sharp and might get even sharper, if he didn't batter his brains out playing senseless Division

Three football. Smiling, Wesley highlighted UR LOCAL and pushed the select button. This message came up:

ACCESS CURRENT UR LOCATION? Y N

Wesley selected Y. The Kindle thought some more, then posted a new message:

THE CURRENT UR LOCAL IS MOORE*ECHO*
ACCESS? Y N

Wesley considered the question while eating a strip of bacon. The *Echo* was a rag specializing in yard sales, local sports, and town politics. The townies scanned those things, he supposed, but mostly bought the paper for the obituaries and Police Beat. Everybody liked to know which neighbors had died or been jailed. Searching 10.4 million Moore, Kentucky Urs sounded pretty boring, but why not? Wasn't he basically marking time, drawing his breakfast out, so he could watch the players' bus go by?

"Sad but true," he said, and highlighted the Y button. What came up was similar to a message he had seen before: *Ur Local is protected by all applicable Paradox Laws. Do you agree? Y N.*

Now *that* was strange. The New York *Times* archive wasn't protected by these Paradox Laws, whatever they were, but their pokey local paper was? It made no sense, but seemed harmless. Wesley shrugged and selected Y.

WELCOME TO THE *ECHO* PRE-ARCHIVE!
YOUR PRICE IS $40.00/4 DOWNLOADS
$350.00/10 DOWNLOADS
$2500.00/100 DOWNLOADS

Wesley put his fork on his plate and sat frowning at the screen. Not only was the local paper Paradox Law-protected, it was a hell of a lot more expensive. Why? And what the hell was a pre-archive? To Wesley, that sounded like a paradox in itself. Or an oxymoron.

“Well, it’s under construction,” he said. “Traffic fines double and so do download expenses. That’s the explanation. Plus, I’m not paying for it.”

No, but because the idea persisted that he might someday be forced to (someday *soon!*), he compromised on the middle choice. The next screen was similar to the one for the *Times* archive, but not quite the same; it just asked him to select a date. To him this suggested nothing but an ordinary newspaper archive, the kind he could find on microfilm at the local library. If so, why the big expense?

He shrugged, typed in July 5, 2008, and pushed select. The Kindle responded immediately, posting this message:

FUTURE DATES ONLY
THIS IS NOVEMBER 20, 2009

For a moment he didn’t get it. Then he did, and the world suddenly turned itself up to super-bright, as if some supernatural being had cranked the rheostat controlling the daylight. And all the noises in the café—the clash of forks, the rattle of plates, the steady babble of conversation—seemed too loud.

“My God,” he whispered. “No wonder it’s expensive.”

This was too much. *Way* too much. He moved to turn the Kindle off, then heard cheering and yelling outside. He looked up and saw a yellow bus with MOORE COLLEGE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT printed on the side. Cheerleaders and players were leaning out the open windows, waving and laughing and yelling stuff like “*Go, Meerkats!*” and “*We’re number one!*” One of the young women was actually wearing a big foam Number One finger on her hand. The pedestrians on

Main Street

were grinning and waving back.

Wesley lifted his own hand and waved feebly. The bus driver honked his horn. Flapping from the rear of the bus was a piece of sheeting with **THE MEERKATS WILL ROCK THE RUPP** spray-painted on it.

Wesley became aware that people in the café were applauding. All this seemed to be happening in another world. Another Ur.

When the bus was gone, Wesley looked down at the pink Kindle again. He decided he wanted to utilize at least one of his ten downloads, after all. The locals didn't have much use for the student body as a whole—the standard town-versus-gown thing—but they loved the Lady Meerkats because everybody loves a winner. The tourney's results, pre-season or not, would be front-page news in Monday's *Echo*. If they won, he could buy Ellen a victory gift, and if they lost, he could buy her a consolation present.

"I'm a winner either way," he said, and entered Monday's date: November 23rd, 2009.

The Kindle thought for a long time, then produced a newspaper front page.

The date was Monday's date.

The headline was huge and black.

Wesley spilled his coffee and yanked the Kindle out of danger even as lukewarm coffee soaked his crotch.

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Fifteen minutes later he was pacing the living room of Robbie Henderson's apartment while Robbie—who'd been up when Wesley came hammering at the door but was still wearing the tee-shirt and basketball shorts he slept in—stared at the screen of the Kindle.

"We have to call someone," Wesley said. He was smacking a fist into an open palm, and hard enough to turn the skin red. "We have to call the police. No, wait! The arena! Call the Rupp and leave a message for her to call me, ASAP! No, that's wrong! Too slow! I'll call her now. That's what —"

"Relax, Mr. Smith—Wes, I mean."

"How can I relax? Don't you *see* that thing? Are you *blind*?"

"No, but you still have to relax. Pardon the expression, but you're losing your shit, and people can't think productively when they're doing

that."

"But—"

"Take a deep breath. And remind yourself that according to this, we've got almost sixty hours."

"Easy for you to say. *Your* girlfriend isn't going to be on that bus when it starts back to—" Then he stopped, because that wasn't so. Josie Quinn was on the team, and according to Robbie, he and Josie had a thing going on.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I saw the headline and freaked. I didn't even pay for my breakfast, just ran up here. I know I look like I wet my pants, and I damn near did. Not with coffee, either. Thank God your roommates are gone."

"I'm pretty freaked, too," Robbie admitted, and for a moment they studied the screen in silence. According to Wesley's Kindle, Monday's edition of *The Echo* was going to have a black border around the front page as well as a black headline on top of it. That headline read:

COACH, 7 STUDENTS KILLED IN HORRIFIC BUS CRASH; 9 OTHERS CRITICAL

The story itself really wasn't a story at all, only an item. Even in his distress, Wesley knew why. The accident had happened—no, was *going* to happen—at just short of nine PM on Sunday night. Too late to report any details, although probably if they heated up Robbie's computer and went to the Internet—

What was he thinking? The Internet did not predict the future; only the pink Kindle did that.

His hands were shaking too badly to enter November 24th. He pushed the Kindle to Robbie. "You do it."

Robbie managed, though it took him two tries. *The Echo*'s Tuesday story was more complete, but the headline was even worse:

DEATH TOLL RISES TO 10
TOWN AND COLLEGE MOURN

“Is Josie—” Wesley began.

“Yeah,” Robbie said. “Survives the crash, dies on Monday. Christ.”

According to Antonia “Toni” Burrell, one of the Meerkat cheerleaders, and one of the lucky ones to survive Sunday night’s horrific bus-crash with only cuts and bruises, the celebration was still going on, the Bluegrass Trophy still being passed hand-to-hand. “We were singing ‘We Are the Champions’ for the twentieth time or so,’ she said from the hospital in Bowling Green, where most of the survivors were taken. “Coach turned around and yelled for us to keep it down, and that’s when it happened.”

According to State Police Captain Moses Arden, the bus was traveling on Route 139, the Princeton Road, and was about two miles west of Cadiz when an SUV driven by Candy Rymer of Montgomery struck it. “Ms.Rymer was traveling at a high rate of speed west along Highway 80,” Captain Arden said, “and struck the bus at the intersection.”

The bus-driver, Herbert Allison, 58, of Moore apparently saw Ms. Rymer’s vehicle at the last moment and tried to swerve. That swerve, coupled with the impact, drove the bus into the ditch, where it overturned and exploded…

There was more, but neither of them wanted to read it.

“Okay,” Robbie said. “Let’s think about this. First, can we be sure it’s true?”

“Maybe not,” Wesley said. “But Robbie…can we afford to take the chance?”

“No,” Robbie said. “No, I guess we can’t. Of *course* we can’t. But Wes, if we call the police, they won’t believe us. You know that.”

“We’ll show them the Kindle! We’ll show them the story!” But even to himself, Wesley sounded deflated. “Okay, how about this. I’ll tell Ellen.

Even if she won't believe me, she might agree to hold the bus for fifteen minutes or so, or change the route this guy Allison's planning to take."

Robbie considered. "Yeah. Worth a try."

Wesley took his phone out of his briefcase. Robbie had gone back to the story, using the NEXT PAGE button to access the rest.

The phone rang twice…three times…four.

Wesley was preparing to deliver his message to voicemail when Ellen answered. "Wesley, I can't talk to you now. I thought you understood that __"

"Ellen, listen—"

"—but if you got my message, you know we're *going* to talk." In the background he could hear raucous, excited girls—Josie would be among them—and lots of loud music.

"Yes, I did get the message, but we have to talk n—"

"No!" Ellen said. "We *don't*. I'm not going to take your calls this weekend, and I'm not going to listen to your messages." Her voice softened. "And hon—every one you leave is going to make it harder. For us, I mean."

"Ellen, you don't understa—"

"Goodbye, Wes. I'll talk to you next week. Do you wish us luck?"

"Ellen, *please!*"

"I'll take that as a yes," she said. "And you know what? I guess I still care about you, even though you are a lug."

With that she was gone.

.

He poised his finger over the redial button…then made himself not push it. It wouldn't help. Ellen was wearing her my-way-or-the-highway hat. It was insane, but there it was.

"She won't talk to me except on her schedule. What she doesn't realize is that after Sunday night she may not *have* a schedule. You'll have to call Ms. Quinn." In his current state, the girl's first name escaped him.

“Josie’d think I was prankin’ on her,” Robbie said. “A story like that, *any* girl’d think I was prankin’ on her.” He was still studying the Kindle’s screen. “Want to know something? The woman who caused the accident—who *will* cause it—hardly gets hurt at all. I’ll bet you next semester’s tuition she was just as drunk as a goddam skunk.”

Wesley hardly heard this. “Tell Josie that Ellen *has* to take my call. Have her say it’s not about us. Tell her to say it’s an emer—”

“Dude,” Robbie said. “Slow down and listen. Are you listening?”

Wesley nodded, but what he heard most clearly was his own pounding heart.

“Point one, Josie would *still* think I was prankin’ on her. Point two, she might think we *both* were. Point three, I don’t think she’d go to Coach Silverman anyway, given the mood that Coach has been in lately…and she gets even worse on game trips, Josie says.” Robbie sighed. “You have to understand about Josie. She’s sweet, she’s smart, she’s sexy as hell, but she’s also a timid little mousie. It’s sort of what I like about her.”

“That probably says heaps of good things about your character, Robbie, but you’ll pardon me if right now I don’t give a tomcat’s ass. You’ve told me what won’t work; do you have any idea what might?”

“That’s point four. With a little luck, we won’t have to tell anybody about this. Which is good, since they wouldn’t believe it.”

“Elucidate.”

“First, we need to use another one of your *Echo* downloads.” Robbie punched in November 25th, 2009. Another girl, a cheerleader who had been horribly burned in the explosion, had died, raising the death-toll to eleven. Although the *Echo* didn’t come right out and say so, more were likely to die before the week was out.

Robbie only gave this story a quick scan. What he was looking for was a boxed story on the lower half of page one:

CANDACE RYMER CHARGED WITH MULTIPLE COUNTS OF VEHICULAR HOMICIDE

There was a gray square in the middle of the story—her picture, Wesley assumed, only the pink Kindle didn't seem able to reprint news photographs. But it didn't matter, because now he got it. It wasn't the bus they had to stop; it was the woman who was going to hit the bus.

She was point four.

VI—Candy Rymer

At five o'clock on a gray Sunday afternoon—as the Lady Meerkats were cutting down basketball nets in a not-too-distant part of the state—Wesley Smith and Robbie Henderson were sitting in Wesley's modest Chevy Malibu, watching the door of a roadhouse in Eddyville, twenty miles north of Cadiz. The parking lot was oiled dirt and mostly empty. There was almost certainly a TV inside The Broken Windmill, but Wesley guessed discriminating tipplers would rather do their drinking and NFL-watching at home. You didn't have to go inside the joint to know it was a hole. Candy Rymer's first stop had been bad, but this second one was worse.

Parked slightly crooked (and blocking what appeared to be the fire exit) was a filthy, dinged-up Ford Explorer with two bumper stickers on the back. MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT THE STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, one read. The other was even more succinct: I BRAKE FOR JACK DANIELS.

"Maybe we oughtta do it right here," Robbie said. "While she's inside slopping it up and watching the Titans."

It was a tempting idea, but Wesley shook his head. "We'll wait. She's got one more stop to make. Hopson, remember?"

"That's miles from here."

"Right," Wesley said. "But we've got time to kill, and we're going to kill it."

"Why?"

"Because what we're up to is changing the future. Or trying to, at least. We have no idea how tough that is. Waiting as long as possible improves our chances."

“Wesley, that is one drunk chick. She was drunk when she got out of that first juke-joint in Central City, and she’s going to be a lot drunker when she comes out of yonder shack. I can’t see her getting her car repaired in time to rendezvous with the girls’ bus forty miles from here. And what if *we* break down while we’re trying to follow her to her last stop?”

Wesley hadn’t considered this. Now he did. “My instincts say wait, but if you have a strong feeling that we should do it now, we will.”

“The only strong feeling I have is a scared-to-freakin’-death feeling,” Robbie said. He sat up. “Too late to do anything else, anyway. Here she comes, Miss America.”

Candy Rymer emerged from The Broken Windmill in a moderate weave. She dropped her purse, bent down to get it, almost fell over, cursed, picked it up, laughed, and then continued to where her Explorer was parked, digging her keys out as she went. Her face was puffy, not quite hiding the remains of what must once have been very good looks. Her hair, blond on top and black at the roots, hung around her cheeks in lank curls. Her belly pooched out the front of elastic-waist jeans just below the hem of what had to be a Kmart smock top.

She got in her beat-to-shit SUV, kicked the engine into life (it sounded in desperate need of a tune-up) and drove forward into the roadhouse’s fire door. There was a crunch. Then her backup lights came on and she reversed so fast that for one sickening moment Wesley thought she was going to hit his Malibu, crippling it and leaving them on foot as she drove off toward her appointment in Samarra. But she stopped in time and peeled onto the highway without pausing to look for traffic. A moment later Wesley was following as she headed east toward Hopson. And the intersection where the Lady Meerkats’ bus would arrive in four hours.

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In spite of the terrible thing she was going to do, Wesley couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for her, and he had an idea Robbie felt the same. The

follow-up story they'd read about her in the *Echo* told a tale as familiar as it was sordid.

Candace "Candy" Rymer, age forty-one, divorced. Three children, now in the custody of their father. For the last twelve years of her life she'd been in and out of spin-dry facilities. According to an acquaintance (she seemed to have no friends), she had tried AA and decided it wasn't for her. Too much holy-rolling. She had been arrested for DUI half a dozen times. She had lost her license after each of the last two, but in both cases it had been restored, the second time by special petition. She needed her license to get to her job at the fertilizer factory in Bainbridge, she told Judge Wallenby. What she didn't tell him was that she had lost the job six months previous…and nobody checked. Candy Rymer was a booze-bomb waiting to go off, and the explosion was now very close.

The story hadn't mentioned her home address in Montgomery, but it didn't need to. In what Wesley considered a rather brilliant piece of investigative journalism (especially for the *Echo*), the reporter had retraced Candy's final binge, from The Pot O' Gold in Central City to The Broken Windmill in Eddyville to Banty's Bar in Hopson. There the bartender was going to try to take her keys. Unsuccessfully. Candy was going to give him the finger and leave, shouting "I'm done giving my business to this dive!" back over her shoulder. That was at seven o'clock. The reporter theorized that Candy must have pulled over somewhere for a short nap, possibly on Route 124, before cutting across to Route 80. A little further down 80, she would make her final stop. A fiery one.

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Once Robbie put the thought in his head, Wesley kept expecting his always-trustworthy Chevrolet to die and coast to a stop at the side of the two-lane blacktop, a victim of either a bad battery or the Paradox Laws. Candy Rymer's taillights would disappear from view and they would spend the following hours making frantic but useless calls (always assuming their phones would even work out here in the williwags) and cursing themselves

for not disabling her vehicle back in Eddyville, while they still had a chance.

But the Malibu cruised as effortlessly as always, without a single gurgle or glitch. He stayed about half a mile behind Candy's Explorer.

"Man, she's all over the road," Robbie said. "Maybe she'll ditch the damn thing before she gets to the next bar. Save us the trouble of slashing her tires."

"According to the *Echo*, that doesn't happen."

"Yeah, but we know the future's not cast in stone, don't we? Maybe this is another Ur, or something."

Wesley didn't think it worked that way with UR LOCAL, but he kept his mouth shut. Either way, it was too late now.

Candy Rymer made it to Banty's without going in the ditch or hitting any oncoming traffic, although she could have done either; God knew she had enough close calls. When one of the cars that swerved out of her way passed Wesley's Malibu, Robbie said: "That's a family. Mom, Pop, three little kids goofin' around in the back."

That was when Wesley stopped feeling sorry for Rymer and started feeling angry at her. It was a clean, hot emotion that made his pique at Ellen feel paltry by comparison.

"That bitch," he said. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. "That drunken who-gives-a-shit *bitch*. I'll kill her if that's the only way I can stop her."

"I'll help," Robbie said, then clamped his mouth so tightly shut his lips nearly disappeared.

•

They didn't have to kill her, and the Paradox Laws stopped them no more than the laws against drinking and driving had stopped Candy Rymer on her tour of southern Kentucky's more desperate watering holes.

The parking lot of Banty's Bar was paved, but the buckling concrete looked like something left over from an Israeli bombing raid in Gaza.

Overhead, a fizzing neon rooster flashed on and off. Hooked in one set of its talons was a moonshine jug with XXX printed on the side.

The Rymer woman's Explorer was parked almost directly beneath this fabulous bird, and by its stuttering orange-red glow, Wesley slashed open the elderly SUV's front tires with the butcher knife they had brought for that express purpose. As the *whoosh* of escaping air hit him, he was struck by a wave of relief so great that at first he couldn't get up but only hunker on his knees like a man praying.

"My turn," Robbie said, and a moment later the Explorer settled further as the kid punctured the rear tires. Then came another hiss. He had put a hole in the spare for good measure. By then Wesley had gotten to his feet.

"Let's park around to the side," Robbie said. "I think we better keep an eye on her."

"I'm going to do a lot more than that," Wesley said.

"Easy, big fella. What are you planning on?"

"I'm not planning. I'm beyond that." But the rage shaking through his body suggested something different.

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According to the *Echo,* she had called Banty's a dive in her parting shot, but apparently that had been cleaned up for family consumption. What she actually threw back over her shoulder was, "I'm done doing business with this shitpit!" Only by this point she was so drunk the vulgarity came out in a slippery slur: *shippih*.

Robbie, fascinated at seeing the news story played out before his eyes right down to the upraised middle finger (which the *Echo* had primly referred to as "an obscene gesture"), made no effort to grab Wesley as he strode toward her. He *did* call "Wait!" but Wesley didn't. He seized the woman and commenced shaking her.

Candy Rymer's mouth dropped open; the keys she'd been holding in the hand not occupied with bird-flipping dropped to the cracked concrete

tarmac.

“Leggo me, you bassard!”

Wesley didn’t. He slapped her face hard enough to split her lower lip, then went back on her the other way. “*Sober up!*” he screamed into her frightened face. “*Sober up, you useless bitch! Get a life and stop fucking up other peoples’! You’re going to kill people! Do you understand that? You are going to fucking KILL people!*”

He slapped her a third time, the sound as loud as a pistol-shot. She staggered back against the side of the building, weeping and holding her hands up to protect her face. Blood trickled down her chin. Their shadows, turned into elongated gantries by the neon bird, winked off and on.

He raised his hand to slap a fourth time—better to slap than to choke, which was what he really wanted to do—but Robbie grabbed him from behind and wrestled him away. “Stop it! That’s enough!”

The bartender and a couple of goofy-looking patrons were now standing in the doorway, gawking. Candy Rymer had slid down to a sitting position. She was weeping hysterically, her hands pressed to her swelling face. “Why does everyone hate me?” she sobbed. “Why is everyone so goddam mean?”

Wesley looked at her dully, the anger out of him. What replaced it was a kind of hopelessness. You would say that a drunk driver who caused the deaths of at least eleven people had to be evil, but there was no evil here. Only a sobbing alkie sitting on the cracked, weedy concrete of a country roadhouse parking lot. A woman who, if the off-and-on light of the stuttering rooster did not lie, had wet her pants.

“You can get the person but you can’t get the evil,” Wesley said. “The evil always survives. Isn’t that a bitch. Just a total bitch.”

“Yeah, I’m sure, but come on. Before they get a *really* good look at you.”

Robbie was leading him back to the Malibu. Wesley went as docilely as a child. He was trembling. “The evil always survives, Robbie. In all the Urs. Remember that.”

“You bet, absolutely. Give me the keys. I’ll drive.”

“*Hey!*” someone shouted from behind them. “Why in the hell did you beat up that woman? She wasn’t doing nothing to you! Come back here!”

Robbie pushed Wesley into the car, ran around the hood, threw himself behind the wheel, and drove away fast. He kept the pedal down until the stuttering rooster disappeared, then eased up. “What now?”

Wesley ran a hand over his eyes. “I’m sorry I did that,” he said. “And yet I’m not. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Robbie said. “You bet. It was for Coach Silverman. And Josie too.” He smiled. “My little mousie.”

Wesley nodded.

“So where do we go? Home?”

“Not yet,” Wesley said.

.

They parked on the edge of a cornfield near the intersection of Route 139 and Highway 80, two miles west of Cadiz. They were early, and Wesley used the time to fire up the pink Kindle. When he tried to access UR LOCAL, he was greeted by a somehow unsurprising message: THIS SERVICE NO LONGER AVAILABLE.

“Probably for the best,” he said.

Robbie turned toward him. “Say what?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” He put the Kindle back in his briefcase.

“Wes?”

“What, Robbie?”

“Did we break the Paradox Laws?”

“Undoubtedly,” Wes said. And with some satisfaction.

At five to nine, they heard honking and saw lights. They got out of the Malibu and stood in front of it, waiting. Wesley observed that Robbie’s hands were clenched, and was glad he himself wasn’t the only one still afraid that Candy Rymer might still somehow appear.

Headlights breasted the nearest hill. It was the bus, followed by a dozen cars filled with Lady Meerkat supporters, all honking deliriously and flashing their high beams off and on. As the bus passed, Wesley heard young female voices singing “We Are the Champions” and felt a chill race up his back and lift the hair on his neck.

He raised his hand and waved.

Beside him, Robbie did the same. Then he turned to Wesley, smiling. “What do you say, Prof? Want to join the parade?”

Wesley clapped him on the shoulder. “That sounds like a damn fine idea.”

When the last of the cars had passed, Robbie got in line. Like the others, he honked and flashed his lights all the way back to Moore.

Wesley didn’t mind.

VII—The Paradox Police

When Robbie got out in front of Susan and Nan’s (where LADY MEERKATS RULE had been soaped on the window), Wesley said, “Wait a sec.”

He came around the front of the car and embraced the kid. “You did good.”

“Ungrammatical but appreciated.” Robbie wiped at his eyes, then grinned. “Does this mean I get a gift A for the semester?”

“Nope, just some advice. Get out of football. You’ll never make it a career, and your head deserves better.”

“Duly noted,” Robbie said…which was not agreement, as they both knew. “See you in class?”

“On Tuesday,” Wesley said. But fifteen minutes later he had reason to wonder if *anyone* would see him. Ever again.

•

There was a car in the spot where he usually left the Malibu when he didn’t leave it in Parking Lot A at the college. Wesley could have parked behind it, but chose the other side of the street instead. Something about the

car made him uneasy. It was a Cadillac, and in the glow of the arc sodium beneath which it was parked, it seemed too bright. The red paint almost seemed to yell *Here I am! Do you like me?*

Wesley didn't. Nor did he like the tinted windows or the oversized gangsta hubcabs with their gold Cadillac emblems. It looked like a drug dealer's car. If, that was, the dealer in question also happened to be a homicidal maniac.

Now why would I think that?

"Stress of the day, that's all," he said as he crossed the deserted street with his briefcase banging against his leg. He bent down. Nobody was inside the car. At least he didn't *think* so. With the darkened windows, it was hard to be entirely sure.

It's the Paradox Police. They've come for me.

This idea should have seemed ridiculous at best, a paranoid fantasy at worst, but felt like neither. And when you considered all that had happened, maybe it wasn't paranoid at all.

Wesley stretched out a hand, touched the door of the car, then snatched it back. The door felt like metal, but it was warm. And it seemed to be *pulsing*. As if, metal or not, the car were alive.

Run.

The thought was so powerful he felt his lips mouth it, but he knew running wasn't an option. If he tried, the man or men who belonged to the loathsome red car would find him. This was a fact so simple that it defied logic. It *bypassed* logic. So instead of running, he used his key to open the street door and went upstairs. He did it slowly, because his heart was racing and his legs kept threatening to give way.

The door of his apartment stood open, light spilling onto the upstairs landing in a long rectangle.

"Ah, here you are," a not-quite-human voice said. "Come in, Wesley of Kentucky."

•

There were two of them. One was young and one was old. The old one sat on his sofa, where Wesley and Ellen Silverman had once seduced each other to their mutual enjoyment (nay, ecstasy). The young one sat in Wesley's favorite chair, the one he always ended up in when the night was late, the leftover cheesecake tasty, the book interesting, and the light from the standing lamp just right. They both wore long mustard-colored coats, the kind that are called dusters, and Wesley understood, without knowing how he understood, that the coats were alive. He also understood that the men wearing them were not men at all. Their faces kept *changing*, and what lay just beneath the skin was reptilian. Or birdlike. Or both.

On their lapels, where lawmen in a Western movie would have worn badges, both wore buttons bearing a red eye. Wesley thought these too were alive. Those eyes were watching him.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Smelled you," the older of the two replied, and the terrible thing was this: it didn't sound like a joke.

"What do you want?"

"You know why we're here," the young one said. The older of the two never spoke again at all until the end of the visit. Listening to one of them was bad enough. It was like listening to a man whose voice-box was stuffed with crickets.

"I suppose I do," Wesley said. His voice was steady, at least so far. "I broke the Paradox Laws." He prayed they didn't know about Robbie, and thought they might not; the Kindle had been registered to Wesley Smith, after all.

"You have no idea what you did," the man in the yellow coat said in a meditative voice. "The Tower trembles; the worlds shudder in their courses. The rose feels a chill, as of winter."

Very poetic, but not very illuminating. "What Tower? What rose?" Wesley could feel sweat breaking on his forehead even though he liked to keep the apartment cool. *It's because of them*, he thought. *These boys run hot.*

“It doesn’t matter,” his younger visitor said. “Explain yourself, Wesley of Kentucky. And do it well, if you would ever see sunshine again.”

For a moment Wesley couldn’t. His mind was filled with a single thought: *I’m on trial here.* Then he swept it aside. The return of his anger—a pale imitation of what he had felt toward Candy Rymer, but real anger, just the same—helped in this regard.

“People were going to die. Almost a dozen. Maybe more. That might not mean much to fellows like you, but it does to me, especially since one of them happens to be a woman I’m in love with. All because of one self-indulgent drunk who won’t address her problems. And…” He almost said *And we*, but made the necessary course-correction just in time. “And I didn’t even hurt her. Slapped her a little, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“You boys can *never* help yourselves,” the buzzing voice of the thing in his favorite chair—which would never be his favorite chair again—replied. “Poor impulse control is ninety per cent of your problem. Did it ever cross your mind, Wesley of Kentucky, that the Paradox Laws exist for a reason?”

“I didn’t—”

The thing raised its voice. “Of course you *didn’t*. We know you *didn’t*. We’re here because you *didn’t.* It didn’t cross your mind that one of the people on that bus might become a serial killer, someone who might murder dozens, including a child who would otherwise grow up to cure cancer or Alzheimer’s Disease. It didn’t occur to you that one of those young women might give birth to the next Hitler or Stalin, a human monster who could go on to kill millions of your fellow humans on this level of the Tower. It didn’t occur to you that you were meddling in events far beyond your ability to understand!”

No, he had not considered those things at all. Ellen was what he had considered. As Josie Quinn was what Robbie had considered. And together they had considered the others. Kids screaming, their skin turning to tallow and dripping off their bones, maybe dying the worst deaths God visits on His suffering people.

“Does that happen?” he whispered.

“We don’t *know* what happens,” the thing in the yellow coat said. “That’s precisely the point. The experimental program you foolishly accessed can see clearly six months into the future…within a single narrow geographical area, that is. Beyond six months, predictive sight grows dim. Beyond a year, all is darkness. So you see, we don’t know *what* you and your young friend may have done. And since we don’t, there’s no chance to repair the damage, if there was damage.”

Your young friend. They knew about Robbie Henderson after all. Wesley’s heart sank.

“Is there some sort of power controlling all this? There is, isn’t there? When I accessed UR BOOKS for the first time, I saw a tower.”

“All things serve the Tower,” the man-thing in the yellow duster said, and touched the hideous button on its coat with a kind of reverence.

“Then how do you know I’m not serving it, too?”

They said nothing. Only stared at them with their black, predatory bird-eyes.

“I never ordered it, you know. I mean…I ordered a Kindle, that much is true, but I never ordered the one I got. It just came.”

There was a long silence, and Wesley understood that his life was spinning inside it. Life as he knew it, at least. He might continue some sort of existence if these two creatures took him away in their loathsome red car, but it would be a dark existence, probably an imprisoned existence, and he guessed he would not retain his sanity for long.

“We think it was a mistake in shipping,” the young one said finally.

“But you don’t know for sure, do you? Because you don’t know where it came from. Or who sent it.”

More silence. Then the older of the two said: “All things serve the Tower.” He stood, and held out his hand. It shimmered and became a claw. Shimmered again and became a hand. “Give it to me, Wesley of Kentucky.”

Wesley of Kentucky didn’t have to be asked twice, although his hands were trembling so badly that he fumbled with the buckles of his briefcase

for what felt like hours. At last the top sprang open, and he held the pink Kindle out to the older of the two. The creature stared at it with a crazed hunger that made Wesley feel like screaming.

“I don’t think it works anymore, anyw—”

The creature snatched it. For one second Wesley felt its skin and understood the creature’s flesh had its own thoughts. Howling thoughts that ran along their own unknowable circuits. This time he *did* scream…or tried to. What actually came out was a low, choked groan.

“This time we’re giving you a pass,” the young one said. “But if anything like this ever happens again...” It didn’t finish. It didn’t have to.

They moved to the door, the hems of their coats making loathsome liquid chuckling sounds. The older one went out, still holding the pink Kindle in its claw-hands. The other paused for a moment to look back at Wesley. “Do you understand how lucky you are?”

“Yes,” Wesley whispered.

“Then say thank you.”

“Thank you.”

It was gone without another word.

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He couldn’t bring himself to sit on the sofa, or in the chair that had seemed—in the days before Ellen—to be his best friend in the world. He lay down on his bed and crossed his arms over his chest in an effort to stop the shudders that were whipping through him. He left the lights on because there was no sense turning them off. He felt sure he would not sleep again for weeks. Perhaps never. He’d begin to drift off, then see those greedy black eyes and hear that voice saying *Do you understand how lucky you are*?

No, sleep was definitely out.

And with that, consciousness ceased.

VIII—Ellen

Wesley slept until the music-box tinkle of Pachelbel's "Canon in D" woke him at nine o'clock the next morning. If there were dreams (of pink Kindles, women in roadhouse parking lots, or low men in yellow coats), he did not remember them. All he knew was that someone was calling his cell, and it might be someone he wanted to talk to very badly.

He ran into the living room, but the ringing ceased before he could get the phone out of his briefcase. He flipped it open and saw YOU HAVE 1 NEW MESSAGE. He accessed it.

"Hey, pal," Don Allman's voice said. "You better check the morning paper."

That was all.

He no longer subscribed to the *Echo*, but old Mrs. Ridpath, his downstairs neighbor, did. He took the stairs two at a time, and there it was, sticking out of her mailbox. He reached for it, then hesitated. What if his deep sleep hadn't been natural? What if he had been anesthetized somehow, so he could be booted into a different Ur, one where the crash had happened after all? What if Don had called to prepare him? Suppose he unfolded the paper and saw the black border that was the newspaper world's version of funeral crepe?

"Please," he whispered, unsure if it was God or that mysterious dark tower he was praying to. "Please let it still be my Ur."

He took the paper in a numb hand and unfolded it. The border was there, boxing in the entire front page, but it was blue rather than black.

Meerkat blue.

The photo was the biggest he'd ever seen in the *Echo*; it took up half of the front page, under a headline reading **LADY MEERKATS TAKE BLUEGRASS, AND THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD!** The team was clustered on the hardwood of Rupp Arena. Three were hoisting a shiny silver trophy. Another—it was Josie—stood on a stepladder, twirling a net over her head.

Standing in front of her team, dressed in the prim blue slacks and blue blazer she invariably wore on game days, was Ellen Silverman. She was

smiling and holding up a handmade sign that read **I LOVE YOU WESLEY**.

Wesley thrust his hands, one still holding the newspaper, over his head and let out a yell that caused a couple of kids on the other side of the street to look around.

“Wassup?” one of them called.

“Sports fan!” Wesley called back, then raced back upstairs. He had a call to make.